ALFRED
MARCH 35¢
HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE
NEW stories
presented by
the master
of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

Do you recall—and I'm sure you must—that recruiting poster in which Uncle Sam not only impolitely points, but fairly bellows, "I need you!" This—by way of clarifying the over-powering cover of the present issue. I, too, need you—as readers, but conscience also requires that you be satisfied ones as well. So will you please write me of your likes and dislikes—primarily, I hasten to add, in the realm of the mystery story.

Now I shall criticize this extraordinarily superb issue of this intrinsically fine publication—without bias, and by the strictest standards of objectivity: Alfred Hitchcock has done it again! He has assembled more variety in this pleasing package than one would dare expect. A horror story, for those so inclined. And at long last, the Civil War (ours) breaks into print. At this point I would like to say, in all seriousness, that if we must have war, let's really try to keep it as civil as possible. But I digress, there are also stories of suspense, adventure, deduction and most foul murder waiting to entertain you.

On cold—or warm—winter nights, I recommend reading. Not only is it inexpensive, but it is better than ever for you. This observation has been made in the public interest. Adieu. . .

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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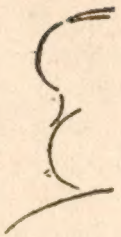
For those of you who have a sweet tooth, be hereby informed that revenge is sweet. And though — unlike other sweets — revenge is not bad for the teeth, it does wreck havoc on the body generally. This, of course, includes the mind. I, personally, do not recommend it.



WITH A CALM and deliberation befitting her calling, Lottie Kimball took the starched white uniform from her closet and spread it carefully across the bed. Then, seated at her vanity table, she pulled the dry gray strands of her hair back over her head, and snapped an elastic over the unlovely bun. She didn't give the mirror the satisfaction of seeing her until the uniform was draped on her thin, bony frame, and the nurse's cap was squared over her forehead. Only then did she face the glass, to offer it an image not of beauty, but of efficiency and quiet competence.

But her tranquillity was a pose. Inside, Lottie Kimball was an excitement, a hurricane whose eye was in her stomach. From the moment she had heard Dr. Blackman's grave, professional tones on the telephone, describing the patient in whose care she would be entrusted, she had felt the hurricane gathering force. From the moment she heard his words . . .

"I hope you can make it tonight, Miss Kimball. My patient's completely helpless, the wreck was a pretty bad one. He's lucky to be alive at all; the people in the other car were killed outright . . ."

"Yes," she had said, shutting her eyes and listening to the throb of her own pulse. "Yes, I can make it, doctor. I'll report at eight."

She had kept her silence since that call, and that was strange for Lottie Kimball. In her loneliness, she had become accustomed to little conversations with herself, brief speeches of encouragement or idle chatter. But after Dr. Blackman's call, she was silent. No need to say anything now. Merely thank God. Thank Him for the chance, for the opportunity to do what He had told her to do, so many years before. Humbled she was silent. Thankful, she left the dim rooms of her flat and went out into the wet night, towards the bus stop that would bring her to the door of the Macready Hospital. And as she waited in the fine mist, her lips moved without sound, shaping the words. *The people in the other car were killed outright. Oh, Daniel, Daniel, I haven't forgotten . . .*

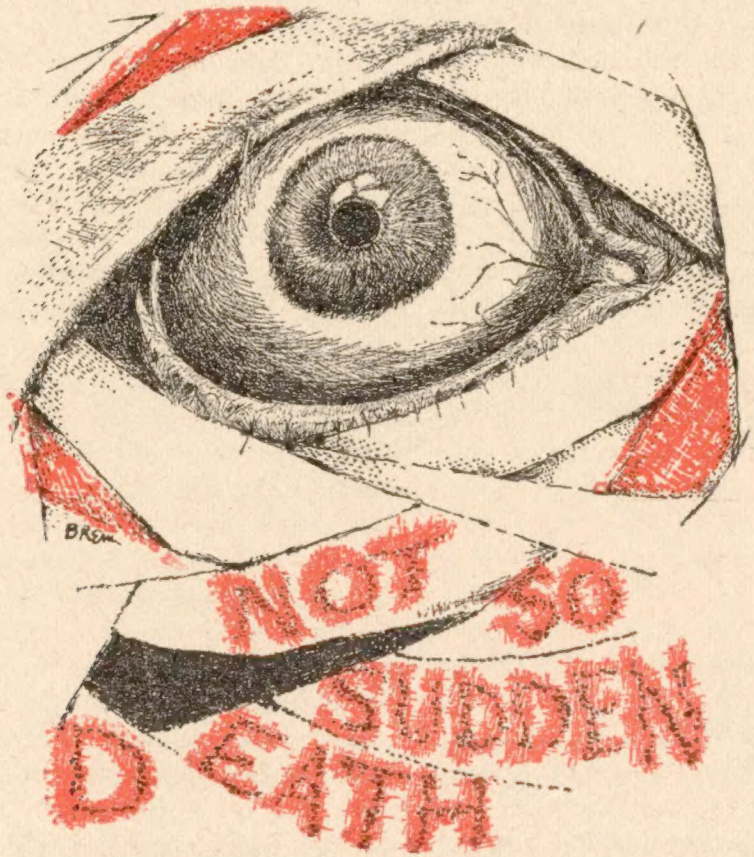
Dr. Blackman was waiting for her in the corridor; he started talk-

ing even before she had removed her dark blue cape. He was bald and blunt, with a heavy tobacco smell about him; she didn't like so much maleness in a man.

"The patient's name is George Mathis," he said briskly. "He was brought in early this morning, after his car collided with another on the Merritt. Multiple fractures, cuts, head injuries, we're not sure about internal damage yet. However, his injuries are so extensive that it was necessary to wrap him up rather thoroughly; you'll see what I mean when you go in. We've contacted his relatives by phone—they're in Iowa, and won't be able to get here for a few days. They've authorized us to give him any care necessary."

"Private room?" Lottie Kimball said.

"Yes, he's in 503. There's not much you can do for him, of course; I've left you instructions regarding medication. I'm not giving him anything potent; I don't want any further shock. But you'll have to observe him at repeated



by Henry Slesar

intervals to make sure he's all right; he'll have no way of communicating with you."

"Paralyzed?"

"I hope it's only temporary. But he can't move or speak; he'll have to be fed intravenously tomorrow, but that will be Miss Cartwright's job."

He frowned, and rubbed his thumb-tips together, as if trying to think of something else to say. When no words followed, she swallowed hard and said:

"I haven't worked on a case of yours for some time, Dr. Blackman. It was nice of you to think of me."

His mouth twisted, in not quite a smile. "I suppose I remembered that other case, that Hoffman woman. He reminded me of her, all bandaged up that way." His features went grave. "But I don't think we'll have the same bad luck with this fellow. I think he'll pull through, barring complications."

"Yes," Lottie Kimball said dryly. "And those other people, the people he hit with his car . . . ?"

"They're beyond our help now," Dr. Blackman said.

When the doctor left, she took the elevator to the private floor. On the front desk, she found the folder marked MATHIS and went down the hallway towards Room 503.

Mary Rose, the hospital nurse, looked up from the paperback she was reading when Lottie Kimball entered. There was surprise on her face when she saw her, and a touch of guilt.

"Gee, am I glad to see you," she said, in a youthful fluster. "This one gives me the creeps. You taking over now?"

"I'm taking over," Lottie frowned.

"He's all yours, then." She smoothed the white folds of her uniform and went to the door. "He's no beauty," she said, and went out.

Lottie Kimball turned to see her patient.

If life throbbed beneath the stark bedsheet, it gave no sign. If there was heartbeat, respiration, or consciousness on the hospital bed, no one could know. The man had been mummified, swaddled in bandages that encased all but an inch of his body. His legs and arms were rigid in splints, his head and face concealed by tightly-wrapped gauze. Only one eye, one peephole to the world, was exposed. Lottie Kimball, drawing in her breath, leaned over the bed and saw that the eye was closed.

For a moment, she did nothing, felt nothing. Not pity, or excitement, or the pleasurable surge of hatred she had expected. Nothing.

Then she listened. From the small round hole in the mummy's head, barely visible among the bandage folds, she heard the faint whistle of breath.

Mr. Mathis, Mr. George Mathis, slayer of innocents, was himself still among the living.

Lottie Kimball smiled thinly and looked at her watch. It said eight-ten. She would wait another hour, she told herself, another hour for the eye to open. If Mr. Mathis failed to stir, she would awaken him.

She wanted him to know. Everything. Before.

Lottie pushed the armchair closer to the bed, and sat down. She folded her hands in her lap, and waited.

At eight-thirty, her patient moaned.

She stood up and went to his side; automatically, she began to reach for his pulse, and then stopped. She stood by stolidly, her gaze fixed upon the lowered eyelid.

It opened.

"I'm Mrs. Kimball," she said. "I'm your night nurse. Dr. Blackman called me in this afternoon. I'm here to take care of you, Mr. Mathis."

From the tiny aperture where the mouth would have been, the whistle of breath blew faster.

"You're lucky to be alive, you know. I heard about what happened, that wreck you had on the parkway. Those other people weren't so lucky, Mr. Mathis. You know that, don't you?"

The eye blinked.

"It's a pity you can't talk. I know now you must want to talk about it. That woman, she talked a blue streak afterwards, as if talking would make things right. But of course, it doesn't really help. Death is death, isn't it? Talking never brought anyone back to life." Her hand closed the while collar about her throat, as if she were cold. Then, with a sudden quaver of doubt in her voice, she said: "You can hear me, can't you, Mr. Mathis? You can hear what I'm saying?"

Only the whistle, and the staring eye.

"If you can hear me, Mr. Mathis, close your eye for just a second. Will you do that?"

The eyelid dropped, and then lifted again.

"Ah," Lottie Kimball said. "I'm glad of that, Mr. Mathis. It would be a shame for you, not knowing. That woman, she didn't know, not a thing. That was the pity of it. I would have wanted her to know; that would have made it so much better."

She turned and went to the painted white bureau. She took the folder from its surface, humming softly to herself, until she unwittingly caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. The image startled her; she hated the surreptitiousness of mirrors. Frowning, she returned to the bedside, spreading the folder open in her hands.

"Dr. Blackman left instructions for me, Mr. Mathis. About medication and so forth—things I'm sup-

posed to do for you. But he doesn't know how well I intend to take care of you, Mr. Mathis. I'm going to do you a great service. A kindness, really. One that should make you happier. Would you like to know what that is?"

She chuckled faintly, and put the folder on the chair. Then she leaned over the mummified figure, and put her lips close to the bandaged ears.

"I'm going to kill you, Mr. Mathis."

The eye, the single eye, rounded in a circle of horror, stared back at the grim white triangle that was Lottie Kimball's face.

"You see why, don't you, Mr. Mathis? The others are dead. Killed. Mangled. And *you,* responsible, lie here, alive. Not fair, Mr. Mathis, you know that. Death would be a mercy now, wouldn't it?" She straightened up.

"I am that mercy."

The eye was blinking wildly.

"You're frightened," Lottie Kimball smiled. "You're frightened, because you have time to think about it. For those others, for Daniel, there wasn't time to think. Only the quick, sudden end — without time, or thought, or prayer. But you can think, and that's what bothers you. Am I right, Mr. Mathis?" She frowned deeply. "That woman last year. That Hoffman woman. She didn't know what was going to happen to her; I didn't warn her. She might have told them, and they would have stopped me . . . So I kept my silence. I simply did what I had to do, what He wanted me to do. But she never knew, and I was sorry about that. It would have been right for her to know why she had to die."

She had turned about, and again, a flash of mirror-image came, making her cry out in surprise.

"Damn you!" She whispered, to no one. Then she whirled on the man in the bed, and her voice was naked with hatred. "You want to know why, don't you? Because of Daniel, that's why! Daniel, my husband. It was someone like you —God knows, it might have *been* you!—who took him away from me. In a flash, in a moment, in a single second! Five years ago it was, but I've never forgotten. Do you understand. *I've never forgotten!"*

The eye was trying to signal. If eyes could speak, she would have heard the pleading voice.

"I wait for ones like you, Mr. Mathis. You killers, with your shiny cars and your speed and your recklessness. *She* was one of you, that Hoffman woman. A man, and a woman, and an infant—she killed them. But her life was spared, spared because He wanted it that way. So that I could administer—" She drew herself up. "Justice!"

The door of Room 503 opened.

"Everything okay?"

It was a young Chinese interne,

a friendly beaming face thrust suddenly like a light bulb into the dark room.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Kimball. How's our patient?"

The words strangled her. "He—he's fine, Dr. Chin. Not a bit of trouble out of him."

"Dr. Blackman asked me to look in once in awhile. Pretty bad accident, I hear. I'll be going off duty in an hour; you want me before then, you holler, Mrs. Kimball."

"I'll do that, Dr. Chin."

He hesitated, and then walked into the room. He looked down at the bandaged figure, down at the exposed eye, and Lottie Kimball wrapped her thin arms about her waist in expectancy and dread.

"Looks like he's awake," Dr. Chin said.

"Yes." She shivered.

"You cold, Mrs. Kimball? Maybe you ought to close that window a little. Getting chilly out."

"Yes. Yes," the nurse said. "That's a good idea. Thank you, Dr. Chin."

"Goodnight," the interne said cheerfully, and went to the door.

She sighed, blinking back the tears of relief. Then she returned to the bedside.

"You wanted to tell him," she said icily. "You wanted to ask for help. But you couldn't, Mr. Mathis. Don't you see why? It was arranged this way. So that you would be silent; so that you would hear my words and know what I was going to do. It was He who saw to that."

She glanced at her watch.

"It's almost nine," she said. "In another half hour, you're supposed to receive medication, Mr. Mathis. Be ready for it." She closed her eyes, and swayed on her flat heels. "Be ready for it . . ."

The solitary eye pleaded.

Lottie Kimball pushed back the hospital armchair, and sat down wearily. She leaned back, feeling the nurse's cap crush against the back of the cushion. She shut her eyes, and slipped into the reveries which came so easily to her since Daniel's death. It was pleasant, in the dark world behind her eyelids, where colors danced and glided to unheard music. After awhile, she almost managed to conjure up the face of her dead husband; but as usual, the ghostly image faded before she could see it clearly. *I haven't forgotten, Daniel,* she murmured aloud.

When she stirred, the hands of her watch were at nine-twenty-five.

Her eyes snapped fully open and she looked towards the bed. The figure was trying to move! It was trying to rock itself back and forth, trying to make the frozen legs and arms respond. She stood up and came forward, and saw the eye more enlarged than ever, the single gray pupil rolling insanely within the bloodshot field of white. The breath whistled through the tiny opening of his bandages, and the

moaning in the man's throat was like the whimper of a small doomed animal.

"No, no," Lottie Kimball crooned, something like sympathy on her face. "No, no, Mr. Mathis. Too late for anything now, too late. I'm going to get your medication, Mr. Mathis, the special medication I brought you. You won't find it painful. The Hoffman woman slept her way into death when I gave it to her. And you will, too, Mr. Mathis, I promise you that . . ."

The eye closed, as if resigned. But it opened again, and all light had died behind it.

"That's better," Lottie Kimball said. "That's better now."

Then she went to her purse, and removed the hypodermic needle.

"I haven't forgotten," she whispered, as she pumped the clear liquid from the vial.

She walked slowly to the bed, and lifted the rigidly bandaged arm.

When the mummy rose to sitting position, its single eye fixed steadily upon her, the effect was so startling and macabre that Lottie Kimball shrieked and couldn't stop shrieking even when her hands covered her gaping mouth. The needle fell to the bed; the bandaged left hand of the terrible sitting thing reached for it and held on firmly. The right hand went swiftly to the bandages that circled the head, and began to unwind, unwind, unwind the long strip of gauze that bound it. Lottie went on screaming, screaming until there was thunder in the hallway outside, until she heard Dr. Blackman's deep, professional, reassuring voice, urging her to calm, to sanity. And then she was looking at the man's face, the lined young stranger's face still framed in loose bandages, and was hearing him.

"I was right," he said. "I was right about her, Dr. Blackman. I told you I was. She killed Margaret; it wasn't the injuries at all . . ."

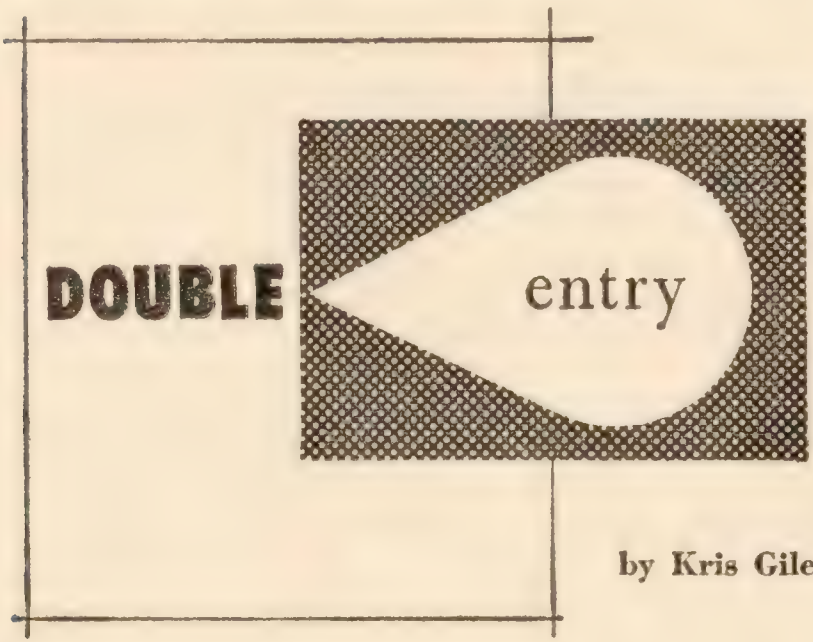
"All right, Mr. Hoffman, all right, you've made your point." Dr. Blackman was holding her, gently, comfortingly.

"I knew it would work," the young man said, without triumph in his voice. "I knew I could prove it if you gave me the chance. She's the one who killed my wife . . ."

He brought the still-bandaged hands to his face, and began to weep. Lottie Kimball looked at him, and her heart stirred with pity. She reached out, and touched his shoulder.

"There, there," she said.

Though honesty is the best policy, there are those who prefer something not quite so good. Dishonesty, for example. Its advocates maintain that it is not only quicker than honesty in getting results, but that it has a certain dramatic aura about it, which only late-late movies at their worst can approximate. And now for our story.



by Kris Giles

BRUNO CARDELLI was a madman. Of all the tax accounts Frank Merrill handled, none gave him so much trouble as Bruno's Napoli Market—groceries, wines and liquors. For example, there was the matter of Sam Rothstein, the tailor. Sam had come out of Hitler's concentration camp with hands so crippled that his work, fine as it was, was too slow to enable him to hold a job in a high paying shop. But Sam had an ailing wife, and so Bruno managed to lose about half of Sam's tabs every month. And then there was Miss Willet, who had been a quiet little school teacher at Acacia Elementary for seventeen years and would have been there yet if she hadn't adopted a practice, unsanctioned by the Board of Education, of wearing a space helmet to class and hadn't climaxed her disgraceful conduct by recruiting the entire third grade on a children's crusade against the Martian invaders she'd found ensconced in the furnace room. Miss Willet lived on delusions and bourbon. The delusions she managed without assistance, but Bruno was a soft touch for that last pint she

always needed before going on the wagon. A madman. Bruno even gave credit to actors.

This was the essence of what Frank was trying to convey to a man named Halloran, who wore the uniform of a police sergeant and regarded him with a face as warm and understanding as a Black Hills monument.

"Mr. Merrill," Halloran said, "you've told us that you stopped in at Bruno's market yesterday afternoon to pick up the monthly report for your tax ledger. At what time did you complete your business?"

Time? Frank's eyes sought a spot on the wall above Halloran's head where a big-faced clock had just settled into the position of two-thirty. AM that was, which was not an hour conducive to clear thinking or bright repartee. Nor was the atmosphere at the police station, whence he'd been conducted after a pair of non-committal officers had used his door for a bongo drum, of a hospitable nature. As yet, nobody had bothered to explain why he'd been routed out at such an hour; he was only asked ridiculous questions.

"I never completed my business," Frank answered. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. I got hung up with this ninety-four dollar shortage . . ."

Words had limitations. Halloran could listen, his attentive ears flaring out from the sides of his bullet-shaped head like the receivers on a radar apparatus, but it required imagination to see Bruno: a big man, chest, shoulders, massive head covered with curly black hair beginning to edge with silver, roaring out at Frank in the thunder he used for a voice.

"You take life too serious, Frank. I'm forty-six years old—that makes only two dollars a year that I'm short. Does it break a man to lose two dollars a year?"

Bruno's philosophy was as erratic as his mathematics, and erratic people shattered Frank's statistic-oriented nerves. Sales receipts were supposed to balance with cash receipts; the government was very particular about such things. He tried to tell Bruno, but Bruno had merely beamed at the neat rows of numbers in the double entry ledger and said—

"Frank, you're an artist! An artist with the numbers!"

No, it was impossible to explain Bruno. It was only possible to answer the ridiculous questions.

"It was a discrepancy in the accounts," Frank said. "I never did get it straightened out because of the interruptions."

"Interruptions?" Halloran echoed.

"Customers," Frank said.

Halloran was interested. Could he remember the customers? Frank glanced at the two officers standing behind his chair and decided he'd have to remember. Sam

Rothstein was one; he'd dropped in for a loaf of bread at about the same time Miss Willet came by for a fifth of scotch, explaining to Bruno that the cameramen who were coming to her apartment to televise the People to People show would like scotch better than bourbon. Sergeant Halloran seemed puzzled, but he didn't interrupt. It was impossible to explain Miss Willet, too. Frank continued to remember. Mrs. Kelsey, yes, he remembered her. The only one of the group who always paid cash. Her name didn't even appear on his ledger. She'd asked for a Frosty-Fresh Pizza Pie, and, when Bruno told her they were no good and customers had been complaining, she took two pizza pies.

"Two?" Halloran echoed.

It was possible to explain Mrs. Kelsey. Her son, Noel, was the salesman for Frosty-Fresh frozen foods, a brand carried only by independent markets. The only reason she came to Bruno's was to buy her son's product and boast about the apartment he'd rented for her in the Martinique Arms with its white carpets and garbage disposal and about his new car with the push button windows.

"She asked about Valery," Frank recalled. "Valery's Bruno's wife. She asked when Valery was expecting the baby, and then she made some remark about how Valery shouldn't have any trouble because she was so young. That upset Bruno. He's sensitive about Valery being about half his age—"

And then Frank broke off and stared at Halloran.

"Conrad—" he said.

"Conrad?" Halloran repeated blandly.

It must be Conrad, Frank thought and glanced at the wall clock again. It had advanced only five minutes in what, under Halloran's stony stare, seemed an hour. There had to be a reason for this untimely invasion, and that Conrad was the culprit made sense, for he had broken into Bruno's market through the skylight in the office about a year ago. Bruno had caught him, but was too tender-hearted to turn a fifteen year old boy over to the law, particularly when it developed that his sole claim to a family was a lovely young sister who was trying to fill the role of mother while earning a living as a night club entertainer. It had taken only a few weeks for Bruno to convince her that what Conrad needed was a brother-in-law, but Conrad never had been convinced. He was always sullen and rebellious.

"Was Conrad in the store yesterday?" Halloran asked.

"He's always in the store," Frank answered. "He's worked there ever since Bruno and Valery were married. He was the one who told me about the safe when we all went back to look at Vesuvius."

It was getting easier to communi-

cate with Halloran. At the mention of Vesuvius, he glanced at the officers behind Frank's chair and nodded knowingly. Vesuvius—complete with the bay of Bruno's native Naples—was Duncan Trent's contribution to Frank's troubles: trouble to the extent of a $50 reduction on Trent's account credited to decorating service for a high-colored mural executed on the office wall. Trent was a young artist who occasionally sold a painting, but ate regularly. It wasn't enough that Bruno had thrown away $50; everybody had to troop into the back room to admire the extravagance.

"I noticed that the safe was open," Frank said. "I asked Conrad about it, and he told me the hinges were sprung. Is that the trouble, Officer? Is that why I'm here? Something about the safe?"

Halloran's expression never changed.

"When did you leave the market?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes later," Frank said. "All of us left right after Bruno answered the telephone in his office. It was Valery—"

It had been wild—as wild as Bruno. Valery was ready to go to the hospital. Everybody out—no time for explanations. Frank had gone off leaving his ledger on the counter. He returned as Bruno was locking up, only to be pressed into emergency taxi service when Bruno's car refused to start. What time was that? About six, Frank thought. And was that the last he'd seen of Bruno? Frank smiled wanly out of sleep hungry eyes. It was not the last he'd seen of Bruno—not for hours. A maternity ward was no place for a bachelor, but he'd stuck it out with Bruno until the baby came.

"A six pound coloratura," Frank said. "That was Bruno's joke. He didn't care if the baby was a basso profundo or a coloratura, just so long as it had good lungs."

"And then you went home?" Halloran asked.

"Yes. —No. Bruno wanted to stop by the market and pick up a bottle of wine to celebrate. I didn't want to stay up any longer, so I dropped him off—"

Frank fell silent. For a moment he could see Bruno as he'd waved him off from the sidewalk outside the store—big, shaggy, ecstatically happy, standing in a bright wash of moonlight; and then a sharp stab of fear cut through Frank's tired bewilderment. This was a police station, and the time was two-forty AM. There had to be a mighty good reason.

There was a mighty good reason. Sergeant Halloran was ready to explain now. Frank was right; the safe had been rifled—the skylight broken as before. Conrad was under arrest, picked up driving a "borrowed" hot-rod, the owner of which had yet to be found.

"The boy hasn't confessed,"

Halloran said, "but when we find his accomplice, the one who owns the car, I think we'll have the answer to a whole series of small market robberies that have been piling up on the books. As soon as we locate the money and the gun—"

"Gun—?" Frank echoed.

Halloran took an object from his desk and handed it to Frank; it was the ledger he'd left at Bruno's.

"I'm sorry we had to bother you at this hour, Mr. Merrill," he said. "We found your name in this book and thought you might be able to help us. You have. Everything you've told us checks out. Conrad's attitude, the broken safe—even the bottle of wine and the painting of Vesuvius. Apparently, Cardelli returned to his store just in time to catch his brother-in-law in the act. He must have thrown the wine bottle at him—we found it smashed against Vesuvius; but Conrad, or his accomplice, was armed. Cardelli is dead, Mr. Merrill. From the bloodstains on the floor, we know he was shot in the office. After that, he crawled out into the store. We found him beside the counter with your ledger in his hand. He was probably trying to reach the telephone on the counter."

Dead. Frank took the word straight, and then, because he wasn't needed anymore, came slowly to his feet.

"It's tough," Halloran added. "A six pound girl, did you say? At least he saw her."

That much was true, but it had nothing to do with the reason why Frank's fingers had no feeling in them as he picked up the ledger.

"He must have been quite a guy," Halloran added.

"He was a madman," Frank said. "But Sergeant, how do you tell a woman in a maternity hospital that the father of her child has just been killed—by her brother?"

Frank Merrill disliked complications. To be a tax accountant was a simple thing: one learned one's business, mastered it, and kept abreast of the laws. The rest was automatic. Any problem having to do with assets and liabilities, profit and loss, depreciation and allowance, Frank knew. Aside from Bruno's Napoli Market, his solitary life had been neat and orderly; but now he was shaken. Back in his apartment, he stared hollow-eyed at the ledger until the moonlight was swallowed by the dawn and the sunlight came to remind him that visiting hours at the maternity hospital began at one-thirty. By that time, his well-organized mind had laid out certain items in his mental ledger and reached the conclusion that something was wanting in the balance. After breakfast, he set out to find the discrepancy.

Sam Rothstein—Hand Tailoring—Ladies and Gentlemen's Suits. Outside, it sounded impressive; inside, it was only a small shop with

a counter, a tiny fitting room, and a long, narrow area behind a plywood partition where Sam and his wife, Sarah, handled the full volume of work, which was mostly letting out trousers or removing worn fur coat collars. Occasionally Sam still made a whole garment, but not often because he was so slow and everybody was in a hurry these days—as much of a hurry as if they had broken in through a skylight and robbed a safe.

Sam and Sarah listened to the story, shaking their gray heads.

"Such a good man, Bruno," Sam sighed. "Who would do such a terrible thing?"

"The police are holding Conrad," Frank said.

"Conrad? — Oh, the brother of Valery. That's right. He broke in through the sky-light once before. Such a tragedy!"

When Sam said that, Frank realized something he'd never thought about before. Conrad had broken into the market by way of the skylight, but the incident had never come to court and was never publicized. Still, he knew about it and Sam knew about it. He mentioned the fact. Sam stared up at him, his eyes momentarily lost behind his bi-focals.

"Of course, I know. Everybody knows. Bruno talked about everything—you know Bruno."

Frank nodded.

"It might have been easier for Conrad if he hadn't," Sam said. "Nobody likes an unpaid debt hanging over his head."

"An unpaid debt—?"

A look of guilt crept into Sam's face. It wasn't a stranger there. Sam's world had bred him to look guilty. It was the mark of the hunted.

"I mean," Sam added quickly, "that Bruno shouldn't have talked so much about what he did for Conrad. The boy may have resented it." Sam smiled wanly. "But I suppose Bruno had to talk, Mr. Merrill. Bruno was made that way—big talk, always. Big heart but big talk, too. He never meant to hurt anybody, only—"

Sam fell silent.

"Only what?" Frank asked.

"Only sometimes he did. But that isn't important now. The important thing is that there's a tragedy. Poor Valery."

Sarah edged closer. "With a new baby," she added. "Sammy, I want to give the baby what we talked about before."

Sam nodded. "Give, Sarah. Go ahead, give."

Frank waited while Sarah went back to the small apartment behind the store and then returned with a bundle in her hands, a bundle wrapped in heavy paper—faded and torn.

"It's nothing new," she said, "but fine. Very fine. I made myself."

"Even the lace," Sam added.

"Even the lace, Mr. Merrill. You tell Valery that I made myself. It

was to be for the baby of our son's wife—"

Mrs. Rothstein's voice broke and her eyes filled with tears. Sam took the package and pressed it into Frank's hands.

"They took our son and his wife away before the baby came," he said. "We never heard of her again. It's better we get rid of these things —better Bruno's baby uses them. The world is full of sadness, Mr. Merrill. Believe me, the world is full of sadness."

Frank believed him. He took the bundle and left Sam and his wife, the guilt still lingering in their eyes.

Miss Willet — Miss Carolyn Willet, according to the telephone directory—didn't have a sign painted on her front window; she didn't even have a front window. Her address was one which ran into fractions—a small unit toward the rear of a stucco bungalow court. It was morning, and Miss Willet came to the door in a slightly faded, shapeless housecoat. At first, she was reluctant to let Frank come inside. Yes, she remembered him from someplace. Bruno's Napoli Market? Yes, that was it. A robbery? Bruno dead? All of the color faded from Miss Willet's face. How awful! She stepped back and opened the door.

"I'm sorry the place is so messed up," she apologized. "Those television people—"

There was only one glass on the coffee table, along with what remained of the fifth of scotch she'd gotten from Bruno. Both looked sad among a clutter of magazines, old newspapers and books. There were books everywhere—a few on shelves, most of them on the floor. The room was disorderly, but it wasn't dirty. It was just confused. Frank, embarrassed at the job he'd cut out for himself, accepted Miss Willet's invitation to sit down on a place she hurriedly cleared on the divan, and thumbed through a few books while the ex-schoolteacher retreated to the bedroom to change into something less comfortable, but more suitable to early morning callers.

She returned wearing a soft shirtwaist and a skirt with a slight flare. She had combed her hair, which was a natural blonde edging toward brown, and added a little powder and lipstick. There wasn't a great deal missing from the bottle on the coffee table, and she must have slept off the results of what was missing. She looked shaken, but that was only natural after what he'd told her about Bruno. She sat down in a badly worn chair across from the divan and listened as he spun out the details.

"Poor Mrs. Cardelli," she said.

"That's just it," Frank remarked. "I have to tell Mrs. Cardelli this afternoon. It's tough enough telling her about Bruno, without also having to tell her about Conrad.

What bothers me, Miss Willet, is the moonlight."

Frank didn't expect her to follow him, but she was brighter than she seemed.

"The moonlight?" she echoed. "Oh, you mean because Bruno would have recognized Conrad, under the skylight."

It wasn't exactly what Frank meant; he had been thinking that Conrad would have recognized Bruno. It was just as good a thought her way; it was even better.

"Miss Willet," he said, "after all, you—" He hesitated at the verge of the past tense and then changed it to present. "—*are* a teacher. You know more about children than I do, and Conrad isn't much more than a child. Do you really think he could shoot down Bruno in cold blood?"

"In the excitement—" she suggested.

"Knowing that he was such a soft touch and had let him off before," he added. "and last night, of all nights, Bruno would have been generous."

Miss Willet looked troubled.

"But I don't understand you, Mr. Merrill. If Conrad isn't guilty, then who—"

"The safe was unhinged," Frank said. "You must have noticed."

"I?"

"All of us—all of us who went into the office to see Vesuvius must have noticed. And then Bruno got the telephone call and rushed us all out so he could close up." Frank ruminated on his own words for a few seconds, watching Miss Willet's face all the while. "Maybe I'm just imagining things," he added. "It's just that it was such a perfect night for a burglary—the safe broken and Bruno away at the hospital."

"For Conrad, you mean," Miss Willet said.

It always came back to Conrad. Frank had no rebuttal.

"It's difficult to realize that Bruno's gone," Miss Willet added sadly. "He was such a warm, generous person."

"Sometimes a person with a big heart gives the wrong things," Frank said. He glanced at the bottle on the table and then, catching Miss Willet's eye, flipped open the cover of one of the books. "This is in Greek, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"And you can read it?"

"Yes."

"Now, that's remarkable! Do you know, you're the first person I've met who can read Greek? I'd be awfully proud of that if I were you."

"Would you, Mr. Merrill?"

"I sure would. It takes a good mind to master something like that. Well, I'll be getting along, Miss Willet. I just wanted to tell you about Bruno and ask your opinion of Conrad. I wanted to talk to someone, I guess."

"You wanted to talk to me?"

The words sounded so incredulous that Frank, on his feet now, paused to stare at the small, wondering face of Miss Willet, and it occurred to him that no one had wanted to talk to her for a very long time.

"If I can be of any help," she added quickly, "—with the baby, I mean. You tell Mrs. Cardelli, won't you, Mr. Merrill."

"I'll tell her," Frank said.

"And, Mr. Merrill, tell Mrs. Cardelli that she doesn't have to worry about me—with the baby, I mean. Those stories I told in the market, about the television men and such, I just made them up. I just wanted something to talk about."

"I know," Frank said.

"And I'm sorry that I couldn't be of any help to you."

Miss Willet was wrong. She had been of more help than she knew.

It was almost noon when Frank reached Duncan Trent's apartment. It was a small guest house affair secluded in a heavily shrubbed patio. He found Trent barefoot, wearing a heavy knit sweater over flannel pajamas, sprawled in a lawn chair drinking coffee from a pottery mug.

"Be careful of the Camellia sasanqua," he called out, as Frank entered the patio. "It's blooming at last. This is the first year I've been able to get results with it. Magnificent, aren't they?"

They were just flowers. Frank glanced at the shrub in passing.

"This must be my lucky year," Trent added. "Even the Fatsia japonica is thriving. You've no idea how I've nursed it along."

But it hadn't been Bruno Cardelli's lucky year. Trent's boyish face changed from the flush of horticultural enthusiasm to sudden gloom when Frank explained the purpose of his call.

"Oh, how awful!" he exclaimed. "And how awful for Valery! She's such a sweet kid."

"Valery?" Frank said.

"Mrs. Cardelli."

"Yes, I know. I didn't know that you knew her."

"Oh, for years," Trent answered. "We've worked together. I used to do costumes—" And then Trent paused, reading Frank's eyes over the rim of his coffee cup. "What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong was the same thing that had been wrong since Sergeant Halloran had returned Frank's ledger and dismissed him from the police station, but Frank wasn't prepared to explain that. The important thing, the thing that had brought him to Duncan Trent, was the safe with the sprung hinge. Knowing Bruno, it might have been in that condition for weeks. Had Trent noticed it when he painted the mural?

"Safe?" Trent asked. "Oh, you

mean the one that was robbed. Really, you may not believe this, but I never noticed the safe."

Watching Duncan Trent sitting there on the patio in his pajamas and sweater and bare feet, and watching the way his eyes, troubled now with Bruno's death, still managed to seek out the camellia when he thought Frank was getting too close, it wasn't difficult to believe he hadn't noticed the safe.

"A gray metal safe," Frank prodded.

"Gray metal? Oh, a box-like thing."

"Yes, that's it."

"Then I do remember it. I set my paints on it."

"Was it open?"

"The safe? Really, I couldn't say. I was fighting that wall. Plywood. Rough plywood. Fiber-board would have been splendid, but you just can't get a decent color tone with plywood. The absorption is too irregular." And then Trent looked up, frowning. "A bottle of wine thrown against it, did you say? Did it do any damage?"

"I don't know," Frank admitted. "I didn't see Conrad. I don't know if he was hit."

"Oh, I don't mean that! I mean the mural! Still, it doesn't really matter. It wasn't much good."

"It was $50 worth good," Frank reminded.

"I only asked $35."

"Why do you suppose Bruno gave you more?"

"I don't know. That was Bruno's way."

"Maybe it was because you were a friend of Valery's."

Some men might have resented the remark. Trent looked up and caught Frank's eye. His own eyes were large, blue and completely innocent. In fact, Duncan Trent's were the only completely innocent eyes Frank had encountered so far.

"That may be the reason," he admitted. "Bruno was generous—extravagantly generous. That's what makes this thing so terrible. Bruno was so vital—so dynamic!"

"And now he's so dead," Frank added.

Duncan set his cup down on the patio table. His face had become very grave. It seemed as if the full impact of Bruno's death was just getting through to him.

"Bruno," he repeated softly, "—dead. Have you told Valery?"

"Not yet. Visiting hours aren't until one-thirty. I dread the trip."

"I shouldn't wonder. If it will be any help, I'll go along. I want to do whatever I can. I've got a commission coming in next week—nearly a hundred dollars."

"I don't think Valery will be destitute," Frank said. "Bruno didn't give away quite everything."

It wasn't a tactful thing to say, but Trent still didn't seem to mind.

"It's not that," he said. "It's just that a person wants to *do* something. Maybe I can baby sit."

Frank studied Trent's face for a

few seconds and said, more to himself than to Trent, "But can you read Greek?"

"Greek?"

"Never mind, you're not supposed to make sense out of that. But if you still feel up to a trip to the hospital, I'll pick you up around one, one-fifteen."

"You do that," Trent said. "I'll be ready, and I'll cut some of the camellias. Valery should have flowers."

Valery should have flowers. Frank was still ruminating on the words as he walked through the courtyard of the Martinique Arms. There were no flowers. A swimming pool, a collection of colorful outdoor furniture, a few potted plants that looked like plastic props, but nothing really alive. The inside of the building had an even more sterile quality. He wandered through wide, white corridors until he found Mrs. Kelsey's door. He pressed the bell and was announced with a series of chimes so impressive that he stood reverently, hat in hand, when the door opened.

"Yes?"

Mrs. Kelsey pronounced the word in a way that made Frank feel as if he were carrying a suitcase full of brushes. She became less austere when he explained the reason for his call. The door opened and Frank followed the white carpet inside. It was a beautiful apartment. Frank had never been inside such a beautiful apartment. It made it difficult to keep his mind on Mrs. Kelsey's words.

"A shame," she said. "A real shame, but I don't see—"

Mrs. Kelsey's unfinished sentence dangled awkwardly between them. "I don't see what it has to do with me," she had started to say, and Frank had to find a tactful way of explaining his presence. He wasn't even certain of the reason himself. Because Bruno had died beside the counter rather than in the office—yes, but Mrs. Kelsey was a cash customer. Her name didn't even appear in the ledger.

"The safe," Frank began, "was emptied, Mrs. Kelsey."

"Yes?"

"It was broken. Maybe you noticed it yesterday when you went to see the mural."

"The mural? Oh, Mr. Merrill, did you ever see such a ridiculous thing in your life? That Bruno!"

"But the safe—"

"Yes, I know. It's been broken for a long time, Mr. Merrill. My son, Noel, told me about it weeks ago. It was just like the man to neglect his business that way. And that mad scramble when Valery called yesterday! If he had ever organized anything in his life! I told my son, Noel—" And then Mrs. Kelsey's eyes brightened. "But, of course," she said, "that's why you're here, isn't it?"

"It is?" Frank echoed vaguely.

"You're making a collection for poor Valery. Just a moment, young man. I'll get my purse."

Frank suddenly found himself alone on the white carpet, surrounded by the white walls, while Mrs. Kelsey scurried off to another room. She returned moments later and pressed a ten dollar bill into his hand.

"It's so much more practical than flowers," she said. "I think this is a fine thing you're doing, Mr. Merrill. I do hope Valery appreciates having such a sensible friend."

"Well, I really didn't mean—"

"No, no. Don't apologize. I'm glad you came to me. It's like I've always told Noel. Those of us who are fortunate must be generous with our less fortunate neighbors. If this isn't enough, let me know. I do want to help that poor woman."

And Frank smiled for the first time that day.

"Everybody tells me the same thing," he said. "Everybody."

After Frank left Mrs. Kelsey's apartment, he returned to his own and made himself a sandwich and a cup of coffee. It was almost noon, and he had only an hour and a half before that dreaded visit to Valery. While eating, he took out the ledger and studied the columns of figures. Painfully, he deducted $50 from Duncan Trent's account. Sam Rothstein, Miss Willet—there would never be any way of calculating their bills or of collecting them. Bruno had never meant to collect. He just liked people. If a business could be operated on sympathy, Bruno would have been a rich man. But he wasn't. He couldn't even account for the missing $94. Sales were supposed to balance with purchases and show a percentage of profit, but Bruno had left such prosaic matters to his tax accountant.

And Frank Merrill was a meticulous man. He poured over the ledger for another ten minutes before he felt sufficiently sure of himself to return to Sergeant Halloran with an unusual request. Conrad hadn't confessed. His teen-aged companion of the evening had been found and was being grilled.

"We haven't cracked the kid's alibi yet," Halloran explained, "but we will. There's a whole series of burglaries to be cleared up as well as a murder."

"That's why I've come back," Frank explained. "About the burglaries—they were all in independent markets, weren't they?"

Halloran, puzzled, acknowledged that they were.

"And I know you have the telephone numbers of all the victims. Now, if only you will call each of them and ask a certain question..."

Promptly at one-thirty, Frank and Duncan Trent, the latter laden with the finest blooms from the Camellia sasanqua, arrived at the maternity hospital. As tactfully as possible, they explained that Bruno was dead and that Conrad, as soon

as he had been checked out by the police, would be down to see her and his new niece. After that, Frank left Trent, who was better at such things, to help Valery get accustomed to the weight of her grief and walked down the hall to look in at the big window of the nursery. He hadn't told Valery all the details of the story. He hadn't told her, for instance, what he had explained to Sergeant Halloran while Bruno's murderer was being booked. In the first place, as Miss Willet had made him realize, Bruno wouldn't have thrown the bottle of wine at Conrad, whom he certainly would have recognized in the moonlight. Bruno was in too fatherly a mood and Conrad, whether he approved of the situation or not, was family.

"At first I thought I was just looking for an excuse to get out of telling Valery that her brother had murdered Bruno," he confessed to Halloran, "but you hadn't found either the money or the gun, and Bruno had crawled all the way from the office room to the counter before he died—that was the important thing."

"To reach the telephone," Halloran said.

"But why, Sergeant, when there's a telephone in the office. That's where Bruno took the call from Valery yesterday before he ushered all of us out in such a hurry. No, it couldn't have been the telephone that he wanted. But what did he have in his hand? The ledger. My ledger, Sergeant. He must have known, even as he died, that I would still have to balance the books. I think that's what he crawled all that distance to tell me —to balance the books.

"And so I started out with the people who owed Bruno money. Sam Rothstein—he looked guilty, but what does that prove? Sam isn't a killer. The victim, yes, but never the killer. Besides, Sam and his wife gave baby clothes for Valery.

"Next, I went to Miss Willet. A crazy woman, I thought, might possibly do a thing like that if she craved liquor enough. But I learned that it's not liquor she craves; it's a place to put her mind. Too good a mind for her environment, Sergeant. She even reads Greek."

At that point, Sergeant Halloran's face had seemed to indicate that Frank was speaking Greek, but he didn't interrupt.

"Duncan Trent couldn't remember the safe. The painting—yes. He was worried about that. If Bruno had thrown the bottle of wine at Trent, I asked myself, why would Trent ask me if the painting had been damaged? He would know better than I would. No, Duncan Trent isn't a killer. He's a man who gives his camellias to the widow.

"And Mrs. Kelsey, who didn't owe money but who had been in the office and seen the open safe—

would she kill? Hardly. Mrs. Kelsey imagines she's a great lady. She's taught her son to be one of the privileged class and to be generous with his inferiors – not to mention with his mother. She gave me money for Valery. That's interesting, don't you think?"

"Interesting?" Halloran said.

"Everybody gave something–or offered to give something. Baby clothes from the Rothstein's, baby sitting from Miss Willet, flowers from Trent. People give the thing that is dearest to their heart, Sergeant."

Halloran nodded thoughtfully.

"And I've given what I know how to give," Frank added. "I've balanced the books. I found the shortage, Sergeant. Frosty-Fresh frozen food spoilage–$94. Then I remembered how Bruno had warned Mrs. Kelsey about the Pizza Pie, and that got me to wondering how Noel Kelsey's product is going with the other independents, particularly independents which have been burglarized."

"Everyone had discontinued the brand," Halloran said.

"And so Noel Kelsey isn't the success as a salesman his mother thinks he is, even if she does hold him up as a fine example and tell him how disorganized Bruno was when his wife called to go to the hospital."

"Which," Halloran added, "gave him the all clear signal to loot the safe, never thinking Bruno would return and force him to commit a trigger-happy murder. We found the gun in his car, Merrill, along with over six hundred dollars in cash. He couldn't say anything–not anything except, 'Don't tell my mother, Sergeant. Don't tell my mother'."

Sergeant Halloran had it all straight then, and he wasn't at all offended by Frank's bookkeeping methods.

"You should be a detective, Mr. Merrill," he said.

"No," Frank had said. "I'm just an accountant–an artist with the numbers."

He thought of that as he watched through the glass window. To a bachelor like Frank, all new babies looked alike; but when a nurse came along and opened the door into the room, he knew exactly which baby was Bruno's. One black-haired mite was objecting strenuously to the strangeness of life–a perfect coloratura.

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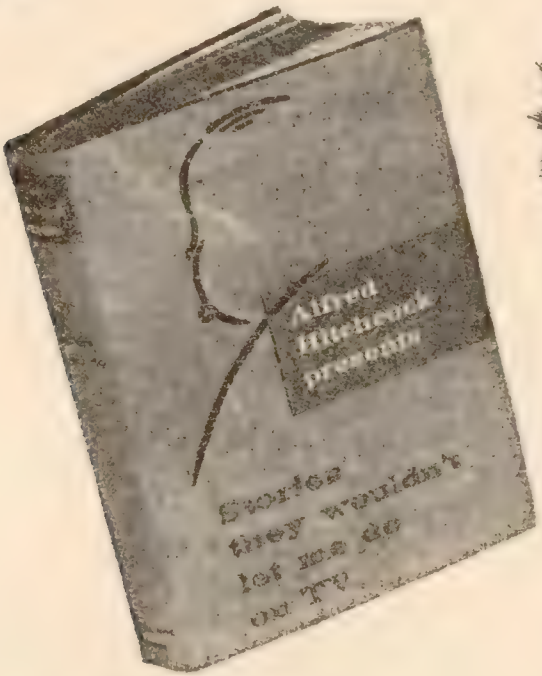

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An Honest Man's Legal Justice

by Donald Honig

THERE aren't many men left in Capstone today who remember Ned Turner who lived in what he used to call the soldier's shack down at the end of the old trolley run near the Baker Avenue cemetery. It wasn't hardly a cemetery yet, in those years when old Ned was living there. The cemetery was just begun then; there wasn't even a fence around it yet; you could stand on the hill and count the tombstones and not miss a one. That was where Ned had his chicken farm, with the big tin sign out in front that read: Family Sized Eggs — Good Prices. Ned would always be sitting in front of the shack on a tin can, puffing on a corn cob, wearing an old blue forage cap that was ex-Union Army property. The chicken farm and the shack too are all gone today, because the cemetery naturally expanded with Capstone and there's nothing left of the place that Ned knew.

The reason some of the old men still remember Ned and still talk about him is because he was the only man in Capstone who fought on the Confederate side in the Civil War. Nobody ever erected any monuments to Ned's distinction of course, but neither was there very much criticism of Ned for taking off to join the Confederates like that because everybody knew the story in those days and most people even wished him luck. Some people say that Ned was probably the only man in the whole of New York State to fight on the other side in that war, and that might be true and it might not.

Ned wasn't a traitor or even a

Southern sympathizer or anything like that. He had his reason. He believed in doing what he believed in doing, and that was what he believed was right. He figured that setting his own sense of justice to work was just as important as anything else in the world. The whole thing was a matter of a man believing in the legal way to do things, believing that that was the only way to get complete and honest justice, believing that if you kept faith in the right it would just have to come about . . . and not only believing in all that but going to a good deal of trouble to adhere to his beliefs.

The whole cause of it was the chicken farm—that, and a deck of dishonest cards and a neighborhood shyster named Pete Mason. Ned lived in Capstone, on that old chicken farm of his, all his long life, except for his time in the army and the time Pete Mason took it away from him.

I suppose there were bigger card games in Capstone than that one, but there never was a more famous one. They played it one snowy night in the old Capstone Hotel

that was a stopover, or station as the old-timers used to call it, for the Long Island farmers and that was such an old place that they said that President George Washington once stopped over there for a night. The old hotel went back to mother earth in one of the town's best fires, in the Nineties. The old buggers said that that ancient place just got so tired of standing up that it started the fire itself just to get out of its misery. Anyhow that was where Ned Turner and Pete Mason turned cards that night. Pete Mason had the reputation of being the lowest, meanest man in the neighborhood. He was a drinker, a cheat, a sneak thief and everything else that would put a man next to a noose but never quite into one. He was eventually run out of town by an irate husband, but that's got nothing to do with Ned Turner and his story.

The card game—it was draw poker—became more and more involved as the evening wore on. There was five foot of snow fallen outside so there was no place to go and no way of getting there anyway, so the boys sat at poker all night. It came down to Ned Turner sitting with empty pockets. Pete asked him if he wanted to put the deed to his chicken farm into the game. Ned had been drinking a good deal of ale by this time (they said that Pete had stood unusually sober the whole time) and so it didn't take much to persuade him to be doing something that he wouldn't ordinarily be at.

"I reckon my luck can't keep traveling in a straight line all night," Ned said.

"That's right," Pete said. "Every road has got to have its bend."

So Ned was betting against the deed to his farm. The boys said that they never saw so much bad luck come steady to a fellow at cards. Ned kept going down time after time until he had lost everything, chicken farm and all. He just shook his head and looked toward the window.

"She still coming down?" he asked.

"Won't stop till July," somebody said.

"All right," Ned said. "Soon's I get through I'll clear out my gear and you can take her over. Don't forget to sing songs to them chicks in the mornings," he said to Pete, "if you want 'em to keep layin'."

So a few days later Pete Mason took over the farm and Ned went down to Newtown Creek where he got a job on a barge there. They say it was somebody on the barge who was a friend of Pete Mason's and who didn't know Ned that told him the story of Pete's winning a chicken farm from a fellow who couldn't tell the difference between a crooked and a honest deck of cards.

"Is that the truth?" Ned said innocently, taking a pull on his pipe.

"That Pete Mason's a sly one," the fellow said.

Ned walked up from the creek that night and busted in on Pete and demanded to know the truth of this thing. Pete got all flustered in the face and grabbed his rifle and told Ned to get off his property—which answered Ned's question about the cards being dishonest.

You can imagine how sore everybody in town was when they heard. Some of Ned's friends were of a mind to go down to the farm with pistols, but Ned held them back.

"It wouldn't be legal," Ned said. That was Ned for you right there—everything had to be done legal or not at all; even if Pete Mason had taken him over by fraud, Ned wasn't going to get redress by any but honest legal means, not that he wasn't sore enough to chew bumble bees. "The farm belongs to Pete," he would say, "but Pete belongs to me." That deed was a bonafide legal document and Pete Mason owned it and that was that. But Ned wasn't going to let it rest that easy, everybody knew.

Ned went back to the barge and kept working, steady and patient. "My turn'll come," he said. His friends kept pumping him up to take out and shoot Pete Mason for what he had done.

"That's not the law, boys," Ned would tell them.

"There's a higher law," one of his friends said, "which corrects the shortcomings which written law is hog-tied to do, and that's the law you ought to invoke right now."

"Yes, that's true, boys," Ned said. "But there is even a higher law than yours, which spoke to men when they was writing them there laws which you claim are hog-tied and allow a man to take another's property by fraud and that higher law than all says that someday soon I'm going to get back my farm and still have my conscience too, having not broken any law, neither legal, moral, nor Biblical, because the existence of right has been proved and justice shall prevail the same as it has endured," Ned told them, all of which was his personal code taught him by his father who had never stole, lied nor cheated.

"If people knowed you were that straight," they told Ned, "they'd of run you for mayor."

"I'm just a farmer," Ned said.

But like Ned knew, something reared up and gave him his opportunity. Ned looked at the whole thing from his personal point of view, as though this conflict between the States which was going to shake the continent till every grassblade quivered and every rock and stone was moved from one place to another, was some kind of intercession of fate's which had interceded especially for him, to give him a chance to enact his own kind of honest legal justice. The war broke out that spring and Ned

heard that Pete Mason had joined up with the —th New York regiment. Pete had got drunk and stole a horse and buggy and drove it down Billy Goat Hill and wrecked it at the bottom, killed the horse and all, and when he heard that the law was after him he figured he'd get out of it by joining up.

Ned thought it over and came to the conclusion that in war it was legal to kill a man, but that it looked like he'd have to join the other side to do it. So he made up his mind and lit out by horse for Richmond and joined up with a Virginia bunch. He promised himself that he'd never shoot at no Union soldier but Pete Mason. His Southern buddies laughed when they heard his story, telling him that there was maybe a hundred thousand men in the Army of the Potomac, but Ned said that that didn't matter as he knew Pete Mason's face and would pick him out of a hundred thousand. Another reb lad asked him what he'd do when the Unions commenced shooting at them.

"I got my beliefs," Pete said, "and they'll take care of that problem when it arises."

Most of his Southern fellow-soldiers put Ned off as either a fugitive or a lunatic, but he wasn't going to shoot at anybody but Pete Mason and that was that. As it turned out they put him in a commissary outfit and he didn't see as much fighting as he might have.

Well Antietam came and went and so did Fredericksburg and Gettysburg and a lot of other places that you can look up in the books. Ned saw hard times. They whistled some bullets at him, but none ever touched and he kept his pledge and never fired but that he was aiming at a tree or some clouds. When his commissary outfit was blown to kingdom come by shells at Gettysburg and he never got a scratch, he knew he had right on his side.

There was three years gone, and they were in Virginia some place, when they pulled in some prisoners from the Unions and Ned and his boys were giving them a feed before taking them away that he heard that the —th New York was right on the other side of the river.

"Any of you boys ever heard of Pete Mason?" Ned asked.

"There's a Pete Mason in a tent near our'n," one of the prisoners said.

"Where's he from?" Ned asked.

"I don't know," the prisoner said. "All I know is that he's the captain of the card table."

"That's the boy," Ned said.

Ned knew that this was his chance, that all his patience was going to see its reward and that legal justice was at last going to be served. When it got good and dark that night, he took off from camp and tiptoed through the pickets and swam the river. He got

through the Union pickets without any trouble and began going through the forest looking for the –th New York and Pete Mason in particular, just walking blind, knowing that fate was on his side, just like a man believing in the stars or something like that, absolutely no doubt in his mind that he'd catch up to Pete Mason now.

It was very dark. The forest here was thick and twisted, like a place of brooding hobgoblins. Ned went through it like a native possum. He could see Union campfires up ahead through the trees. Then he passed a couple of fellows who only listened to his New York voice and never noticed his Confederate duds in the dark, and he asked them whereabouts was the –th New York and they waved him over to another part of the woods. He was going over that way when he saw this fellow coming through the trees. The fellow didn't look like a soldier—that is he didn't walk like one—but he had to be one and Ned knew that only Pete Mason could be a soldier and not look that much like one. So he throwed down his rifle on him and said,

"Stop right there, soldier." The soldier was alarmed and stood right there, still as a tree. Ned came through the trees, his rifle pointed business-like right on him. The soldier was scared froze, like only a man with a whispering conscience can be in the dark. "Pete Mason," Ned said, stepping up to the soldier who was looking at him real careful and curious.

"Why, Ned Turner," Pete said. "What are you doing in that get-up?"

"Don't you even move to breathe," Ned said, holding his rifle right on him. "I reckon I'm going to get hunk for that card game right now."

"Hey, hey, Ned," Pete said, "you ain't going to do that to me."

"I reckon this here difference in the color of our suits makes it all sane and legal," Ned said. "Now don't you try and sweet-talk me out of it neither. I've gone through smoke and hardtack and grapeshot to get to this moment."

"I wouldn't try to sweet-talk you out of nothing, Ned," Pete said, but all the while his mind was burning emergency fuel. Ned picked the gun up to his shoulder and would have done the job right then when Pete said in a right nervous hurry, "Hold back a minute, Ned. You can't do this to me. It's agin the rules of civilized warfare. I'm your prisoner, man. It's agin the rules to do up your prisoner, no matter what personal feelings are in it."

That Pete Mason, he was shrewd all right. Damn if he didn't have Ned stumped again, damn if poor Ned wasn't hamstrung by laws again. Ned was so mad he could've punched over trees with his fist. But he didn't let on. He was doing some thinking himself.

"It all goes down the pipe in war," he said. "Rules don't make sense nowadays, so I reckon I can let you have it and still put my conscience on the pillow tonight."

That really got Pete het up. "I ain't armed," he said.

"All the better," Ned said, "and thank you for the tip." He brought the rifle up again and aimed it straight between Pete's eyes.

"Gawd, Ned," Pete said, "you can't do it."

"Well," Ned said, "I reckon there's one way you can save your hide, but I don't think you'd want to own up to doing it."

"You just name it, Ned," Pete said.

"I shouldn't even be thinking this because it'll cost me my honor as a soldier."

"Anything, Ned," Pete said.

"Well," Ned said, "you just write down on paper that you defrauded Ned Turner out of his farm by means of a dishonest deck of cards, and put your name on it."

Pete Mason was only too glad. He did it quicker than you can sneeze.

"All right, Pete," Ned said. "You get along now and I'll see you back in Capstone." Pete took the opportunity and blowed out of there right quick and Ned went after him, only Pete didn't know it. Ned hit onto a farmhouse soon and, seeing his rebel duds, the people there welcomed him like a messiah. He gave them a good story, got a farmer's outfit, stuck a piece of straw between his teeth and lit out back for home. Once he got past the troop lines he had no trouble. He figured he'd won his own war, and anyway the way things were going there wasn't going to be no Confederate government to give him comeuppance.

So Ned came back to Capstone, chased Pete's flunkies off the chicken farm and picked up his work again. There really wasn't much hard feelings against him in town because everybody knew the purpose of his joining the other side and got a loud guffaw out of the way he had throwed down on Pete Mason in the woods and made him admit the fraud.

But then the war was over and home came Pete Mason, looking to get the farm back. He admitted the whole story of Ned's nabbing him in the woods, admitted he signed the paper, but said he had done it only to save his life and that what Ned had made him write about fraud and dishonest cards was not true. When he went down to the farm, Ned was there with a rifle and told him to stay off.

But Pete went up and down Capstone telling everybody that he had been robbed of his lawful property and making such a fuss about it that Ned finally said he would be willing to go to a court of law and once and for all see who owned the farm. Pete said all right. Pete was probably figuring on Ned's being

branded a traitor and all that because he certainly was the last man in the world to want to stand up in a court of law and look the eagle in the eye.

So they went up to Judge Stetterson who had just then built the big white house on Grant Avenue which that young Doctor Nelson has just now bought. The Judge was at that time known as the most honest man in the whole of Queens County. Ned knew he'd get mighty fine legal jurisprudence from him.

The Judge convened a court in Bumper Clark's blacksmith shop. Pete went first to plead his case, telling his side of the story. The Judge just sat there looking stern and fierce and how Pete Mason could have ever told a lie to that face was beyond anybody. But Pete did. Then Ned rose up and swore on the Bible and told his end of the story, right from the beginning, through the whole war, right up to that moment, explaining why he did everything he did. Well it took the Judge only about two deep breaths before he came out with his decision. He told it straight to Pete Mason:

"Do you mean to stand here," he said to Pete, "and say that a man who would undertake the hazard of leaving his home and enlist in a strange army and voluntarily endure the dangers and privations of warfare just to extract what he believed in his heart was just revenge, and then when he had it in his grasp let his code of honor forbid him from executing it, would come to this court and here this day in front of his neighbors tell such an elaborate lie? This court rules unequivocally that the farm in dispute was obtained by Pete Mason via fraud and therefore is the legal property of Ned Turner. Court dismissed," said the Judge.

"So I got my farm back for keeps," was the way old Ned used to wind it up whenever folks came down and asked him about the story of how he happened to fight in the Confederate Army, "and believe me if I live to be a hundred and people come around wanting to know how I stood it so long, I'll just tell them that I always had a unguilty conscience and a serene feeling in all wrongs being rectified in whatever due time and trouble it might take, just the way the sun is always pressin' to get through dark clouds and always makes it. That's what I'd tell them. Now get on and leave an old man be."

If we did not have weather, it would not only be bad for agriculture, but small talk would be struck a blow from which it might never recover. Those among you who are conversationalists need not fear, however, for science has forecasted both heat and cold for sometime to come.

ANGRY WEATHER

by Helen Nielsen

IT SOMETIMES happened in October, after the summer was over and the citizenry had become concerned with getting gas furnaces re-lighted and windshield wipers repaired before the rainy season began, that a low pressure area over the Pacific would draw the searing desert air westward like a suffocating blanket and the whole city would become an oven on which God had left the door open.

October heat was the worst heat of the year. It was hot in the morning; it was hot in the afternoon; it was still hot after the sun had melted behind a blood-red horizon. There was no use fighting the traffic to crawl down to the beach; it was hotter at the beach. There was no use doing anything but breathing, and as little of that as possible. It was a time when babies cried ceaselessly; dogs were too exhausted to go mad, and fire-spotters watched the hills for signs of smoke as anx-

iously as experienced hands on the police department waited for riot calls and homicide. It was angry weather. The only good thing about it was the way the beer sold out so fast at Grandpa Sanchez liquor store.

Actually, Grandpa Sanchez wasn't really a grandpa. He'd never had children of his own and wasn't particularly fond of them, especially when they filched empty 7 Up and Coke bottles out of the crates in back of the store where he'd stacked them for the pick-up man and then tried to turn them back to him for cash. Once in awhile they succeeded, because Grandpa's eyes, even with the benefit of the new bi-focals, weren't very good any more and neither was his memory. But you had only to listen to Lola, his wife, to know how little was good about Grandpa Sanchez.

"Lazy, stupid, useless old man! Look at me, I have to do all the work. He can't find this; he can't find that. Just stands around blinking and getting in the way. Look out, Benito, move your lazy legs. Can't you see the delivery man is trying to get past?"

Lola's voice, which had been a rich contralto the first time she'd spoken to him, had become harsh and rasping with the passing years; and Benito Sanchez, whom everyone called Grandpa because his hair was white and his body a bent frame upon which his clothes hung loosely, as if some slightly animated scarecrow wore them, would move obediently but grumblingly aside.

"Lazy, useless," Lola would reflect to all within earshot, "and yet he gives all the orders. You'd think I was his slave."

This was difficult for customers to understand, because Grandpa was quiet in the store. Except for yelling the kids away from the empty bottle crates, he never raised his voice or gave an order. It was Lola who did that; he never so much as answered her. He was slow and awkward; but he wasn't offensive—which was more than could be said for Lola. Sometimes, when the nagging was at its worst, a customer would simply walk out, and then she would turn on Grandpa with her dark eyes flashing.

"Now see what you've done, you stupid old fool! We've lost another customer because of your bungling!"

Lola was nearly thirty years younger than Grandpa, and, although he knew the source of her anger and contempt, there was nothing he could do about it. It was his punishment for the folly of marrying a young woman because she was physically desirable, and because he was a man who owned a liquor store and two lots with a five room house behind the store. Yet, how many women out of the fruit picker camps could do so well? So Benito Sanchez had some gray in his hair. Wasn't there

a saying, "There may be snow on top, but there's fire in the furnace?" But that had been ten years ago. The fire had burned out, and Lola was impatient. At forty-five, she was still a good-looking woman, broad in the hips and bosom, but in a generous way that caught the eye of many a strapping fellow who might just be waiting for the day she was free. A widow who owned a store and a house could make a match anytime, if she didn't ruin her disposition screaming at an old man who would be better off dead. Not that she had ever told him these things, but even an old man could read signs and imagine. Most of all, he could imagine.

Benito Sanchez had been a very great man. In his youth, when he was seventeen, he had defeated at wrestling the professional, Cougar Hidalgo, in an exhibition match, two falls out of three.

"On that night," he had told Lola (this was in the days of their courtship), "when all of the people were cheering me and all of the lights were beating down on me, I wanted to die."

"To die, Benito? But why?"

"It was my triumph, my glory."

She hadn't understood. No woman understood such a thing. It is very important that a man should die at a moment of glory; but Maria, his first wife, God rest her sainted soul, had understood no more than Lola. As for the other women he had known, and they were many before he'd taken the marriage vows, they were no less bewildered. Still, it was a good story to tell a woman at a time of courtship, and it wore well with the years.

"You must have been very strong," Lola had murmured, which was a customary comment after the telling of the story.

"The manager of Hidalgo thought I was strong. He offered me a contract."

"And you didn't take it?"

"I had a mother to help support and six sisters and brothers. I was needed in the fields."

"Six brothers and sisters?" There was a note of dismay in Lola's voice. "I didn't know you had a family. I thought you were alone in the world."

"I am alone," he had answered. "Two of my sisters died and one brother was killed in the old war in France. The others live up north —Fresno, Tulare." And then, for just an instant, Grandpa Sanchez had felt a vague stirring that is the instinct of danger. "Why, *carissima?* Don't you like for me to have relatives?"

Lola had smiled, then, so that her even, white teeth shone like twin rows of pearls.

"I don't mind, Benito, as long as they don't live with us. I'm not a schoolgirl and you aren't a Don Juan, but I still don't want relatives dropping in on us on our honeymoon."

And she had laughed deep in her throat in such an inviting way that Benito forgot his instinct of danger and the strength rose up within him until his arms were the arms of the wrestler who had defeated Cougar Hidalgo, and his heart was the heart of a boy who could believe nothing but that the smile of a woman was the promise of eternal bliss.

But bliss is not eternal.

On the third day of the October heat, Wally, the beer man, had to make an extra delivery.

"You'll be a rich man, Grandpa, if the heat holds out the week."

Wally was one of the strapping fellows Grandpa had begun to watch. He was about Lola's age, and his wife had divorced him a year ago.

"She was too fine a lady for my taste," he'd told them. "To delicate and dainty."

"With sharp little claws hidden inside her velvet gloves, I'll bet," Lola said, and then laughed the inviting laugh that Grandpa knew.

Lola's claws were never hidden. They beckoned and challenged every man who came into the store. This was something Grandpa could see even with his failing eyesight. But Wally wasn't the occasional customer. He came back every week. He was the one to look out for. As his eyes grew dim, and his strength waned, Grandpa became more aware of danger. The kids at the empty bottle crates might get away with stealing, but Wally wasn't going to get away with it.

"So you think I'm a rich man," Grandpa said. "You'd like to know how much money I've got?"

Wally had been grinning. His grin faded.

"Now, Grandpa, I was only kidding."

"Pay no attention to him," Lola said. "He imagines things. Everybody's always plotting against him."

"Plotting?" Wally echoed.

How innocent he sounded!

"I don't imagine," Grandpa said. "A man works all his life to get a little something, and then somebody tries to steal it."

"Steal it? Who's trying to steal what?"

Wally's face was thrust forward over the counter, a strong, blunt face flushed with sudden anger. Sweat had made gutters of the creases in his skin, and the threat in his eyes came strained through the tension of heavy heat. For a moment, Grandpa Sanchez was hypnotized by those eyes, and an old stirring to combat quickened his blood. The face was only inches away—but thirty years lengthened the distance. Grandpa's eyes faltered.

"Somebody," he muttered. "A hold-up man." And then his cluttered mind grasped at a fragment of memory to revive his courage. "I fought a hold-up man once," he said. "It was in a bank—"

"Benito," Lola interrupted, "nobody's talking about a hold-up."

"I'm talking about a hold-up!" Grandpa insisted. "It was in a bank on Fresno Street. I was a boy—fourteen, fifteen, but I was strong."

Lola glanced at Wally and a knowing smile passed between them.

"Listen to him, Wally," she said. "This will be good. This is the man who wrestled Cougar Hidalgo."

"And beat him," Grandpa said.

"And beat him two falls out of three. All right, Benito. What happened in the hold-up?"

She was making a fool of him. Grandpa knew this; but his mind stumbled for a story that would make him as big as Wally.

"The hold-up man walked into the bank," he said.

"So a hold-up man walked into the bank," Lola scoffed. "How did you know he was a hold-up man?"

"He had a gun," Grandpa said. "A long black pistol."

"And a mask?"

"A black mask—and a big hat."

"A black hat?"

"Yes, a black hat. A big black hat."

For a moment her face was tense, as if she believed the story he was beginning to believe himself; and then her expression changed abruptly, and she threw back her head and laughed.

"Of course he had a big black hat, Benito, and a mask and a gun. I saw the hold-up man, too. He walked into the bank in the television movie last night, and the fourteen year old boy fought him, Now, if you can stop telling Wally what a great man you think you were, maybe he can get this beer back to the refrigerator before it boils in the bottles."

She had succeeded; she had made a fool of him. Rage rose up in Grandpa Sanchez as Lola swung past him, leading an obedient Wally toward the storeroom behind the counter. Speechless rage that couldn't even find expression in his mind. This was his wife, and it was an unholy thing for a man to hate his wife. Quarrel with her, yes. What man could avoid that? Strike her, even beat her on occasion, surely that was understandable. His thoughts fled back to Maria, who had been so gentle and submissive. True, he had mistreated her sometimes, but that was when he was young and hot-blooded, and Maria had never complained. She understood that he was the man and did what he wanted to do, but Lola was a different kind of woman. He could do nothing but step aside, trembling with anger.

The stockroom was at the rear of the store. From the far end of it opened an outside door which faced the long walk leading to the house sitting deep on the other lot. Because of the heat, this door was open. Grandpa moved his position

behind the counter until he could see into the stockroom where Wally was now busy stacking beer in the huge refrigerator. Lola stood close to him, directing where it should go. As the last six-pack was about to go in, she pulled it back.

"Wait," she said. "Leave one out. I want to take it down to the house."

"Better leave it in the refrigerator until you're ready to go," Wally suggested.

"I'm ready now," Lola said.

Her voice wasn't rasping with everyone; at times it could still sound inviting. Grandpa moved closer to the door. Nobody spoke any more and so there was nothing more to hear; but it did seem that his wife's eyes rested on the delivery man's face longer than was necessary; and then, picking up the carton of beer, she sauntered to the rear door and on out into the sunlight. The delivery man stared after her; then, turning, saw Grandpa Sanchez watching him from the other door. It could have been nothing but the thing Lola had called imagination, but it did seem to Grandpa that the man looked guilty.

He slammed the refrigerator door and came back through the store.

"Relax, Grandpa," he said. "It's too hot."

"Too hot for what?" the old man demanded.

"Too hot to get nervous. You know old lady Moreno from over the Chinese laundry? She keeled over yesterday. The thermometer hit 102 and she keeled right over. Gone just like that."

Wally snapped his fingers, and Grandpa's eyes widened.

"Dead?" he asked.

"Dead. Of course, she was a very old lady. Seventy-two, they say. Anyway, take it easy."

Wally strolled out of the store, and Grandpa Sanchez stared after him turning the words over in his mind. Old lady Moreno—seventy-two. Why should he be told such a story? Didn't everybody know that he'd celebrated his seventy-fourth birthday with a big party at the Mexicali Restaurant only last July? Surely Wally knew it. He'd had too much wine and made a fool of himself dancing with Lola to the juke box music.

A chill that wasn't registered on the thermometer passed through Grandpa's blood. He shuddered, and then the chill gave way to a fresh surge of anger. Now he understood. He was told about the old lady dying because that's what Wally wanted him to do. It was too risky to make a move for Lola now. Grandpa Sanchez might find out and change his will. He might leave his property to the relatives. But if the heat killed him — No, he would not die in the October heat! He would not leave this man to take his woman and his wealth!

At mid-day, the thermometer stood at 104. Lola hadn't returned.

Grandpa Sanchez went to the back door and stared out at the house sitting at the end of the path. The shades were drawn against the sunlight; there was no sign of life. He looked about him at all of the other houses within view; they were all the same—shades drawn, windows closed, silence, no sign of life. There was nothing sinister in any of this; it was the way people tried to protect themselves from the relentless punishment of the heat. Grandpa thought vaguely of lunch, but the path looked too long under the scorching blaze of noon. He turned away and went back into the store. In a glass case on the counter were some bags of peanuts and a few chocolate bars nobody ever thought of buying. The chocolate was soft and sticky, but it was enough to satisfy the slight hunger of the stomach.

Lola didn't return. There was nothing so unusual in that. Trade was slack in the afternoon hours; often she went back to the house and took a nap for an hour or two after lunch. When she didn't return at all, Grandpa concluded that she was angry with him. He didn't know what it was in particular that he'd done this time, unless it was because he'd made up the story about the hold-up man and made a fool of himself in front of Wally. This was one of the things that annoyed her.

"Keep your crazy stories to yourself, Benito. Don't show off your ignorance in front of others. Do you think I want people to know I married an idiot?"

Still, when he reflected on the hold-up, Grandpa still wasn't sure it was made-up. It seemed so real. Maybe Lola was the one who had made up the story this time, and the hold-up man hadn't been on television at all. She might have done that out of spite just to mix him up when she knew all along that the hold-up had taken place in a bank on Fresno Street when he was a boy of fourteen or fifteen—

As if to convince himself, he told the story again to a homebound schoolboy who had wandered into the store seeking shelter from the scorching street.

"A big fellow, he was. Tall, skinny, and real mean eyes looking out over the black mask that covered his face."

"Did he have one gun or two guns?"

Grandpa's forehead furrowed deep over the memory.

"Two guns," he said at last. "Two big black guns with long barrels, and he pointed them at the teller like this—"

Grandpa cocked his two index fingers across the counter, and the large brown eyes of Mike Lopez, who was all of eleven years old, grew wider.

"And did he fire the guns, Grandpa?"

Did he fire the guns? It was difficult to remember.

"He fired both guns," Grandpa said, "but he didn't hit anybody because that was when I jumped him from behind. I was only a boy, not much older than you, but I was very strong. I jumped him and got a strangle hold on his neck."

"Like the wrestlers on television?"

"Television! This wasn't television! This was real! I pulled him backwards with my right arm tight around his throat—" Grandpa's right arm extended and then drew back around the imaginary throat of the imaginary hold-up man. "—and then I put a knee in the middle of his back and dropped him to the floor, and then—"

"You didn't!" Mike Lopez scoffed.

"I did, I tell you. I got him the same way I got Cougar Hidalgo—"

A sudden crashing noise from the storeroom shattered the telling of Grandpa's story, He spun about, startled and then angry as his mind began to piece together what had happened. The empty bottle crates! He hurried to the storeroom, but he was in time only to catch a glimpse of faded denim-clad legs sprinting out of the back door. One of the crates was empty, another had spilled to the floor leaving its contents a rolling glass barrier to pursuit. Stumbling, the old man picked up one of the bottles and waved it angrily at the departing thieves.

"You hoodlums! You stay away from my bottles!" And then his mind grasped another truth. He turned back toward the store. "You —Mike Lopez!"

The decoy taunted him from the street door. He paused just long enough to whirl about and cock his index fingers derisively.

"What did you do to the hold-up man, Grandpa?" he jeered, and then he was gone.

It had all been a trick. The boy had only pretended to believe him in order to keep him occupied so he wouldn't notice what the other boys were doing in the back room. Wearily, Grandpa picked up the remaining bottles and replaced them in the crate. His foot accidentally kicked one bottle and it rolled to the threshold of the back door. He went after it and, as he straightened up from stooping, his eyes found and held the house at the rear of the lot. The drawn blinds were like the memory of an insult. His face flushed and his arm shook the bottle at the impassable gulf of sun drenched distance between himself and his wife.

"There was a hold-up!" he shouted. "There was a man with a mask on his face, and I did crack his neck just the way I got Cougar Hidalgo!"

There was a hold-up. It was a fact. It took a long time for Grandpa Sanchez to establish this firmly in his mind, but through the long, hot afternoon there was no one to

argue the point and confuse him. A few customers, a few more customers, a brief flurry of customers as the buses began to belch out their perspiring cargos of homebound workers, and then the slack that meant everybody had gone home to supper and it was time to lock up the store.

In all this time, Lola hadn't returned, and, although Grandpa's mind cursed her for her laziness, he was relieved that she wasn't there to confuse him again. There had been a hold-up. He glanced at the yellowed face of a battered alarm clock that stood on a shelf behind the counter. It was 6:45. Grandpa Sanchez never closed until 7 P.M., exactly; but there were no customers in the store and the street, as far as he could see, was deserted. It wouldn't hurt to get started locking up. There was a routine for this that never varied: first the back door, locked from the inside so the bolt could be set; then the front door, locked from the outside by the key; then the walk around the corner and back to his house.

Grandpa went to the back door. With his hand on the bolt, he paused and looked out at the house once again. The clocks were still running by summer time, and the sun was just high enough to smite his eyes like a fiery poker. He felt a wave of nausea, as if the chocolate bars had been stale, and then a dizziness so that he had to steady himself with one hand against the door frame; but then the anger rose up inside him, the proud anger of life welling up to meet the enemy, death. No, he would not die of the October heat! He would not be so easy to fool as old lady Moreno. He might be tricked by the boy, Mike Lopez, but not by those who plotted against his life! He glared at the shaded windows of the house; and then it suddenly seemed that they were no longer an insult, but a joke. All of the shaded windows in all of the houses were a joke, because their eyes were blind. They were the fools this time. Didn't they know they could see nothing with their eyes closed?

But his walk to the house was like a walk through a furnace.

It was 6:57 when Grandpa Sanchez returned to the store, closed the back door behind him and bolted it, blotting out the terrible sun. He leaned against the door, exhausted, as if all of the strength had gone out of his body, especially the strength of his arms. It was good that the day was over at last; he had never been so tired. He walked back through the store, pausing to wipe his face with a towel Lola kept hanging at the edge of the counter. The towel was meant for cleaning off the counter at night, but he was too tired for that now. His arms felt as they had

felt after he wrestled Cougar Hidalgo. He let the towel drop to the floor.

He was more than tired; he was filled with a great sense of dread, as if it were the day of judgment and all of his sins were beginning to press down upon him. He wanted to see a priest. He wanted someone to explain what he had done and absolve. He started toward the front door, and then, suddenly and mysteriously, he became aware of the figure that had haunted his mind all afternoon. There was a phantom between him and the door.

In appearance, it was the hold-up man. It was tall and skinny. It wore a wide black hat and a black mask over his face. It carried two black pistols with long barrels that poked at Grandpa Sanchez like fingers across the counter . . .

The fan was a fluctuating caress that passed across Grandpa's face like the soft fingers of a lovely woman. Lola's fingers, cool from the water trough where all of the pickers washed — men and boys stripped to the waist, girls giggling, women grumbling and scolding their flirting daughters. Everything jolly because everybody was young and strong and would never grow old.

Grandpa strained his eyes behind the bi-focals. The caress came again, but now it was only an electric fan standing on the table across the room. Beside the table were two police officers, one of whom, Officer Navarro, he recognized from seeing him on his beat. The other, who wasn't in uniform but who had the face of a policeman anyway, turned and stared at Grandpa Sanchez. He smiled at the stare. It was always a good thing to smile at policemen; his mother had taught him that.

Lieutenant Pollock turned back to Navarro.

"What do you make of him?" he asked.

"I think he's telling the truth," Navarro said. "He hasn't changed his story in all the times we've been over it with him. When a man's lying, he trips over his lie sooner or later; but with the old man it's always the same. He locked up the store in his usual way: the back door first, from the inside, and then the front door, from the outside. His story checks. A tailor across the street, who was working overtime to get a suit pressed for a special customer, saw him lock up. It was exactly 7 o'clock, as the old man says. This was his regular routine. After locking the front door, he walked around the corner to go back to his house . . ."

The fan touched Grandpa's face again. He must have dozed off for a few moments, because now his mind had to get reoriented to reality. Slowly, he began to remember. Yes, Officer Navarro was tell-

ing the truth. It was just that way. He'd gone around the corner and walked back to his house.

". . . and went in through the back door, which was always unlocked. The house was semi-dark because the shades were pulled down to keep out the sunlight. Everybody keeps their shades down in weather like we've been having. That's why nobody saw Sanchez go in the house . . ."

Grandpa nodded. Yes, that was it. Blind eyes couldn't see.

"Which explains why none of the neighbors have reported seeing anyone else go into the Sanchez house," Lieutenant Pollock mused.

"Exactly," Navarro agreed. "The old man went into the kitchen expecting to see his wife busy preparing dinner, and, instead, he found her dead. That was his story when he called us three hours ago, and it's still his story now. We've even used the lie detector and he doesn't crack. I believe him, Lieutenant. I think the old man's told us all he knows."

All? Grandpa's forehead wrinkled. Wasn't there something he'd forgotten? It was no good for the mind to grow old along with the body. It was hard to remember now that the conversation had brought back that terrible piece of time when he stood looking down at his wife's broken body with a kind of sickness coming over him as if the chocolate bars had been stale. His wife with whom he had taken sacred vows. He surely could not have done such a terrible thing. And because Grandpa would not let himself believe that he had, he remembered the gunman and his slow mind began to knit scenes together.

"I suppose you're right," Lieutenant Pollock admitted grudgingly, "but you know where that leaves us, don't you?"

"There's been a lot of talk about Mrs. Sanchez and a beer truck driver," Navarro suggested.

"There's been a lot of talk about Mrs. Sanchez," Pollock corrected, "but we can't make an arrest on gossip. I've sent men out to pick up the driver, but if he has an alibi, and he probably will, we're exactly nowhere. My instincts tell me this is all wrong, Navarro. When a wife is a tramp, as the dead woman seems to have been, her murderer isn't usually so hard to find. These people down here live close to their instincts. We all do. Closer than we like to admit. I don't think we've even reached Sanchez."

"Reached him?" Navarro echoed. "What do you mean?"

Pollock hesitated. "That's just the trouble; I don't know what I mean. Suppose a man lied without knowing that he was lying. Could a piece of machinery detect that?"

"Do you mean the old man killed his wife without knowing it? Pollock, I think the heat's starting to get you."

It was far fetched; Pollock didn't

argue. He turned back to Grandpa Sanchez again.

"All right, Mr. Sanchez," he said. "You can go now."

The old man came slowly to his feet.

"Go home?" he asked.

"Go home," Pollock said. "We've got your statement. We'll call you for the inquest."

It was puzzling, but one did not argue with a policeman. Grandpa walked wearily toward the door.

"Look at the poor old fellow," Navarro said. "He can hardly get around any more. How could you think he killed his wife? You saw her body — battered, bruised, her neck broken."

Grandpa didn't hear Navarro, but he did hesitate at the doorway and turn back. He smiled at the policeman, but that wasn't enough. He had to speak.

They had talked long enough of the terrible thing he had found in his house. He didn't like to think of that; but there was the other thing that had not been mentioned, and that was the thing that took away the dread and guilt. A man protected his woman as well as his property. They couldn't rob him of his glory. And they must feel respect, for respect was a man's due.

"Please, Officer," he said, as he caught Lieutenant Pollock's eyes, "what about the hold-up man?"

Lieutenant Pollock's face was completely without expression.

"Hold-up man?" he echoed.

"With the black hat and the mask and the two long pistols," Grandpa said. "First he killed my wife, and then he came into the store to kill me. But I was too much for him. I got around him and got my arm around his neck like this—" Grandpa's right arm circled the air and then drew tight and hard toward his chest. "—and I pulled tighter and tighter just like the time I defeated the professional wrestler, Cougar Hidalgo."

"He's lying," Navarro interrupted. "He's imagining things. I was in that store, Lieutenant, there's no indication—"

But Lieutenant Pollock silenced Navarro with one hard stare. His hand dropped to the table and switched off the fan, and the room became very still.

"These things are no good in this kind of weather," he remarked. "They only agitate the heat."

And then he looked up at the old man, with thoughtfulness in his eyes.

"Go ahead, Mr. Sanchez," he said. "Tell us more about how you defeated Cougar Hidalgo."

That a wife should be chosen with care is most unromantic and advisable. As you know I am fully qualified to speak on the subject of marriage, for it falls quite naturally under the heading of "Mysteries Most Felonious."

UNIDENTIFIED AND DEAD

A NOVELETTE

by Bryce Walton

SUDDENLY Fred Nebel was cold sober and heading through a Saturday morning blur to the telephone. Only the name of Rudy Weldon had been released in the special news bulletin that had touched off Nebel's grieving drunk. The bulletin had said that all the passengers had been killed, but it hadn't mentioned any other names, nor the number of passengers.

Good God, why had he assumed so quickly and unquestioningly that his wife was one of them? You don't just assume a thing like that, he thought guiltily as he dialed. You ought to make very sure first.

Patiently, the woman at the Los Angeles Daily News said, "Sorry, we can't release a list of casualties until completed identification, and notification of next of kin."

"But my wife could have been on that plane. Luella Nebel."

"Only four passengers have been tentatively identified. Your wife's name isn't among the four."

"There were more than four?"

"Yes."

"What information *can* you give me?"

"The crash occurred three hours ago," she seemed to read from a teletype. "The two-engined Beechcraft exploded and burned. The remains of the victims are being removed to the Chapel of A. Ribesto and Sons in Ten Palms where identification will be completed. The sole witness of the disaster, a sheepherder named Steve Myerson, reported that the plane seemd to lose altitude approaching the San Padres Hills, and crashed and burst into flames a few hundred yards

from Myerson's house. It is believed that the plane may have been overloaded. So far, only four of the seven passengers have been identified, and—"

"Thank you," Nebel cut in, "thank you very much." He almost laughed as he hung up. Ironic that the one among all of Luella's eccentricities he had found the least tolerable should now furnish the joyful assurance that she was alive. He had been surprised to find out that Luella was very superstitious about black cats, ladders, broken mirrors, unlucky numbers. Her psychiatrist had said she needed a belief in magic because people had failed her. But Nebel wouldn't fail her. Maybe her fear of the unlucky number, seven, hadn't failed her.

She wouldn't have been the seventh passenger. After being married to Luella for a year, he knew *that* much at least about his wife.

He put through a long-distance call to Rudy Weldon's number near Ten Palms, and sat listening to the distant nervous buzzing. He sat still, eyes closed. But the lids couldn't shut out the image of Luella projected by his brain. He stared guiltily at the torn bits of paper on the rug, the note Luella had written him saying she was going to Rudy Weldon's for the week end, that he wasn't to get jealous, that she was just too bored, that they might fly up to Big Bear in Rudy's new sportsplane, and cheers. He'd gotten mad, very mad, before he could help it. And then he'd gotten drunk.

The buzzing continued. His eyes strained, searched as if his life depended on some absolutely necessary answer. He poured a pony glass of bourbon. He'd never drank much until the last few months—.

"Sorry. You want us to keep trying and call you back?"

His mouth sagged. His eyes pleaded with the phone, a tense and frightened look. "Yes, of course, keep trying."

He stood up. He refused to believe that Luella was—dead. She wouldn't have gone on that flight. Her behaviour was too erratic and irresponsible for him to have expected her to call him. No one had answered at the Weldon house, but that didn't necessarily mean that everyone guesting there had gone on that flight. Not at all. Those who hadn't gone had undoubtedly left the premises by now and who would blame them? Luella might be in Ten Palms. She might be comforting bereaved friends and relatives. She might be very upset and needing him.

He tried to call the chapel of A. Ribesto and Sons in Ten Palms but the phone was busy, and when he did get through no one would talk with him.

He demanded to know why they just didn't check the guests list at the Weldon house against the num-

ber of passengers. If there had been only seven guests, then that would mean that all of them had gone on the flight. They would have a list of the casualties. But it wasn't quite so simple it seemed.

"Friends and relatives might assume wrongly," the woman said. "Identification must be positive before we can release such a casualty list." She said something else about moral responsibility.

Nebel sat like a forlorn passenger in a station waiting room. He was a big man turning gray, and his mild meaty face was drawn tight with puzzled anxiety. Because he could not stand the strain of waiting, he decided he would drive out to Ten Palms. Rudy Weldon's hacienda was on the way. As he started for the door, the phone rang. "Hello!" Nebel shouted. "Hello!"

"Go ahead please," the operator said.

A woman's faint voice said, "Go ahead, dear? Please name it. I'm sure I've been there."

A frantic sort of syllogism scurried speciously through Nebel's brain. The voice was that of a drunken woman. Luella got drunk at places like the Weldon's. Luella was a woman. This woman could be Luella.

"Luella?" he said.

He heard the throb of a dead line. He called again. There was no answer. Fighting a draining weariness, he went out the back door, across the yard past the barbecue pit to the garage. The housing tract's supermarket dome was dirtied by glinting April sunlight.

The solid heavy slam of his big conventional car door was comforting. He tried to ignore the oily emptiness left by the absence of Luella's MG. He hadn't approved of that MG. He didn't approve of sportscars. They suggested reckless abandon, made him uneasy. Luella drove hers as if she didn't give a damn about hers or anyone else's life. Once she had said she cared about as much for life as for the long white beard of God, which turned out to be a quotation from Baudelaire. She did care of course. Luella's psychiatrist said she did. He said Luella's self-destructive drive stemmed from self-contempt, a feeling of unworthiness. She tested everybody and everything. "Will he love me in spite of what I do? Does fate love me enough to spare me no matter how much I push my luck?"

Without that psychiatrist, Nebel would know from nothing about his own wife. He respected her psychiatrist. Everything turned into simple, easy to understand, incontrovertible logic. It was comforting to know that an authority seemed optimistic about Luella's chances for improvement, and an early escape from her deep emotional disturbances.

He had met her at that rather wild party—the sort of party he

almost never attended—and married her three days later. She had seemed so lovely, young, charming and witty. No one could have guessed how much emotional disturbance lay behind such a beautiful mask. The complexity . . .

Nebel was a cautious driver who took his own skill for granted, and regarded every other vehicle and pedestrian in sight as a potential menace. But only halfway along the straight, sunglazed desert stretch to Ten Palms, between arid sandstone buttes and cactus-studded gullies, he noticed with a numbing sort of shock that the speedometer registered ninety-seven miles per hour. And the needle was still climbing.

Something entirely new and terribly alien happened to Nebel. His familiar controlled self seemed to recede and there was a sense of thrill, of doom, of awful necessity. He wanted to laugh out his defiance of caution and reason. There was a wild sense of surrender to something, and his face suddenly shone with sweat.

He had been driving in a sort of daze, a suspension of feeling. A dreamlike distortion settled over things. The desert with its monotonous landscape gave no impression of movement. Air whooshed. Metal faintly throbbed. Cars that he passed effortlessly seemed to stand still. Detachment, distortion, the nightmare feeling of watching himself heading into disaster, helpless, a sort of onlooker who knew he was a great deal more . . .

The ribbon of desert road seemed to expand, extend into infinity, dipped down through glittering mirages. The needle passed the hundred mark . . .

Nebel remained parked in the shade of yucca trees beside the road for some time. He could still hear the warning echoes of his own yells in his ears. He rubbed at his eyes, then jerked his hand away as if he had been caught in an act of weakness. It wasn't just the whiskey, tension, fatigue. Something else waited, a madness inside of him —kin to Luella's, perhaps—which he had never suspected before.

Again he drove with slow caution —all the way to Rudy Weldon's adobe hacienda. But his caution wasn't the same. Now it was self-conscious. And with every mile a tautness stretched in him to squeaking tension. As if he were one of those trick cyclists he had once, as a kid, seen pedaling along a high tightwire.

Luella's blue MG wasn't among the other sportscars parked in the courtyard. He exhaled a long sigh of affirmed relief. He even felt good when it occurred to him that perhaps Luella hadn't come out to

Weldon's at all. She could merely have said she was coming out here for the week end. She knew how he despised that wild, existential bunch who sat around candle-lit tables reading Baudelaire and smoking tea. Her psychiatrist had explained how, because she felt unworthy of it, she would go to extremes to test Nebel's love.

But her car not being here meant one thing definitely—that if she had been here she hadn't left in Rudy's sportsplane.

Nebel considered driving on into Ten Palms. No, he had better at least check, see if Luella had been here at all, and if she had been here, to find out where she had gone.

As he walked through flowered cactus and up onto the wide columned porch a quick breath of hot air seemed to dry out his face, stretch the skin tight over his cheek bones. Above the red tiled roof, the crests of arid hills were spread with a dirty yellowish light.

The heavy oaken doors were slightly open. He knocked several times, then went into a long, raftered and cooly shaded room. There was the dead fireplace at one end. At the other, a suit of armor watched him from the bottom of a staircase. His eyes moved quickly over the room, only half-seeing the tragic remains of a lavish smorgasbord turned stale, bright cushions ringing a huge redwood coffee table, ceramic mugs stained with lipstick smudges, candles as big as his arms still glowing deep in tallow pits. He shivered a little, then walked through an atmosphere of heavy brooding melancholy to the sideboard and poured a double shot of bourbon. There was a hint of silent ghostly laughter. He stood, listening. He called out several times. No answer. But someone had been here when he had phoned from Van Nuys.

"Boooo!"

Nebel spilled half his bourbon as he turned. A tall, model-thin brunette, walnut tanned, wearing a thin blouse and a pair of toreadors, rose up from the couch near the fireplace. She extended a long leg upward and flexed green-lacquered toes like a monkey.

"Would you pour me something too, please, honey?" She waved an empty glass and studied him. "It's scarey. I feel like a ghost myself because I'm supposed to be dead. I ought to be. But I didn't go on the flight, you see. I got sozzled and passed out and when I came to—they were gone."

"What are you drinking?"

"Anything straight and very Lethean."

He handed her a glass of bourbon straight. Up close, her face appeared slack, her eyes glazed. But they were lovely eyes, and behind them he sensed things buried and transformed.

"You look weird too, sort of wrecked. Sit down."

He sat on a hassock.

"You looking for ghosts, honey? If I believed in them I'd be hearing a gibbering chorus of them now, but I don't. But ghouls I believe in and hate in any form. Such as reporters. People who ask morbid questions."

"My name's Fred Nebel."

"You were the frantic caller! You? God, how Luella misrepresented you. I pictured a thing with watery eyes, bifocals, like a Pekinese."

The phone started ringing. Nebel jumped. "Ignore it, honey. And here you are, big, shaggy, Charles Bickford type. Saint Bernard, naive strength, etc. That Luella!"

The persisting ring of the telephone scraped Nebel's raw nerves. he started to get up.

"No, honey. I've already told them who was here for the weekend. The hell with ghouls regardless of race, creed, or color."

"I noticed that Luella's car isn't outside. I'm wondering where she went, or even if she was here at all."

"Luella said that she left you a note, honey, like with the milkman or something."

"Yes, but—"

"Luella was here all right," the woman said. "Incidentally, my name's Barbara."

"Do you know where she went then," Nebel asked. His voice came out with a small squeezed sound.

Nebel repressed an urge to scream back at the phone that had started ringing again.

"Luella's favorite weapon, Fred. Keep them guessing. The favorite weapon of the Freudian age—the official excuse of sick, sick, sick. Wife takes off for the week end; it's because she's psychoneurotic."

The phone stopped ringing, but left a painfully ringing silence. Barbara sipped bourbon as if it were a coke. "You suffer, I know. But it's hard to sympathize with marital hell. As Sartre said, hell is a restaurant where you serve yourself. But suffering looks good and masculine on you, Fred. I mean, sweat, the beard. Do you smoke Marlboros? Show me your tattoo."

"All I want to know, Barbara, is where did Luella go? Her car's gone. She went somewhere. Try to remember."

Barbara's eyes grew small. Her full lips stretched to a thin hard line. "I remember all right. Luella was here, unforgettably. She was wherever a male was momentarily un-attached."

Anger rose with heavy reluctance in Nebel, With it came a kind of guilty fear. "That's none of your business. Just tell me where she went, if you know. If you don't know, tell me that."

"Pardon my Fredness, Frank—but Luella was my problem. Problem people like Luella become problems for everyone in reach. I loathed little Luella. You see I had a very passionate thing for Rudy.

And little wide-eyed, helpless little Luella got her hooks deep into him. Little Luella couldn't get enough of anything, specially if it was supposed to belong to someone else. Like the so called irresponsible child of nature, she had no respect for private property."

Nebel wiped his mouth with his flat hand. "Barbara — just tell me where Luella went. That's all I ask."

"When I'm sozzled I don't much care what I say or do or anything, Fred. And I'm really sozzled. I'll never sober up again. Then I might think it all mattered, and I couldn't live with that. I loved old Rudy."

Barbara stared at Nebel's jaw, at the nerve twitching in it. "Luella's an obsession of yours by now. Listen—start now, get rid of your obsession."

"By God, she left in the car and went somewhere, and you—"

"Oh—you mean you're sure she drove away in the car because the car isn't here? I see, Fred. Sorry, sorry. But the car never was here . . . never."

"You said Luella was here."

"Yes, but not the car. And therein lies a sordid tale. Her car broke down somewhere down the line. She called in—poor helpless little Luella, you know. Rudy went out and brought her in. They took a mighty long time getting back . . . mighty long."

Nebel rubbed his hand across his eyes. There was a peculiar constriction in his throat. So Luella had been here. And she hadn't left in the car. Then—

The phone started ringing. But now it had a dull, distant, meaningless sound. A voice within Nebel whispered, "What are you doing in this accursed place? Go, get out, go home, go somewhere, anywhere, before it's too late."

He started to ask, "Was Luella on that plane?" He couldn't ask it. He couldn't say anything.

But Barbara could. Barbara not only could, but would, Nebel knew with a horrible certainty. Barbara would never run down.

"I really was attached to Rudy. Though crazy and wild, he was genuine. Luella was pure phony. All phony, no real Luella anywhere. No core. A chameleon. Pretend to be or believe one thing, but all the time several other people or things. Nothing real. Her psychoneurosis, her love life, all phony too. An act, a diversion, little charade. She may have been nuts, but she didn't want to be cured. There never was a real Luella to cure. Luella was just a figment of her greedy little imagination."

The phone must have stopped, for now it began ringing again. Nebel sat dazed, listening to this deadly coherent drunken woman speaking of Luella in the past tense. He gripped her wrist. "Where's Luella?"

"I told the reporters who the guests were here," she said, her

voice getting higher. "Answered telephones all morning. Don't you know how I feel? I mean, weekend guests were all here having a ball, laughing it up, you know, trying to make the tired old merry-go-round go a little faster. Then all at once—they—they were dead and gone."

He shook her. She laughed shrilly. She gripped his wrists with both hands. The glass shattered on the floor. Sensing the pitiable terror under her mask as her hands turned to clawing panic, he quickly released her.

"And then there were none," she said tonelessly. "None but Barbara all alone in limbo. I might even feel self-pity if I sobered up. I loved Rudy."

Nebel stood up. He started for the door.

"Where are going, Fred?"

"To find Luella."

She screamed at him. He turned. "You're alive, Fred. Don't look for Luella. Don't you want to stay alive? You ought to feel lucky you're free. All right, I'm sozzled. I'll tell you honey. She's dead. Luella's dead. Real dead. Completely dead. Dead, dead, dead!"

"You're lying!" Nebel shouted, swinging the palm of his hand at her. She stumbled back and fell sprawling. He stood staring at his opened palm, then down at her welted face. She laughed up at him. "Don't be nice, Fred. Hit me again. You're beginning to look human. How does it feel? Ever hit a woman before? Ever hit anybody before? You're built for it. You hit real good. Only it's better when you hit the right guy."

His voice hadn't sounded like his own. His actions were the incredible shocking actions of someone else. He'd driven his car over a hundred miles an hour; he'd struck this woman.

He sat down and put his hands over his face.

He heard her voice as though through a wall. "What are you trying to prove, Fred? That she really is dead. Can't you believe how lucky you are?"

"Shut up!" he snarled through his hands. "Why take your hatred out on me?"

"I like you, Fred. You're big and nice. Why did you do it, Fred? Because you're over forty, and Luella looked so wide-eyed and young and innocent? Was it flattering to have the old libido pumped by a sweet thing only twenty-two? Be glad that sort of childishness isn't contagious. I see it all over you, the old values, responsibility, loyalty. Luella never heard of them. She laughed at, ridiculed you. She laughed about how you were putting out a hundred a week to that Beverely Hills quack. I'm not against psychiatry. But her guy happens to be one of the greediest quacks since Cagliostro."

He took his hands slowly from his face and looked at her.

"How many guests were here?"

"Eight."

"That's all? How about servants?"

"No servants. Servants have big eyes. They talk."

"And you didn't go on the flight. Seven went which means that you're telling me that my wife—that she was—"

"That's what I've told you. But I won't repeat it. There were seven passengers. There were only seven others here besides me. Little Luella had to have gone, and that's it, my good man."

"You said you were too drunk to go. Did you actually see Luella go aboard that plane?"

She stared at him, neither condemning, nor reproachful, nor with pity, but highly speculative.

"All right, Fred. I was passed out, cold as a Christmas turkey. I didn't see her go aboard."

He stood up and took a deep breath. "Thanks, Barbara. Then they must have picked up someone else. You see my wife was very superstitious. She wouldn't accept a license plate from the Department of Motor Vehicles because of the number seven in it. She wouldn't make appointments on the thirteenth. She was scared to death of unlucky numbers. By some people seven's considered lucky; to her it was poison. So I know she couldn't have been the seventh passenger."

Barbara shrugged. "So, they could have picked up someone else. That's possible. Anything's possible." Her eyes were wet. "I'm sorry, Fred," she whispered. "I'm really sorry that you have to suffer for nothing. We all of us ought to stay young forever."

"Good-bye, Barbara," he said, and went out onto the porch. He walked to the car, got in and slammed the door.

"Fred!"

As he looked toward Barbara running across the courtyard, the sun was a stinging glaze, low and reflecting at a sharp angle into his eyes.

"Where are you going, Fred?"

"To find Luella."

Her face was close to his. Her eyes were soft and dark. "I'm sorry I hurt you, but I'm not sorry for what I said. People like her hurt people like you because you're decent. You won't give up will you? Your kind never gives up."

"She was my wife—she didn't have any real friends."

"I understand. But — I'm sober now, you sobered me up. I can't stay out here alone any longer, not sobered up."

"Why don't you go home?" he asked gently.

"I will. I'm practically on my way home right now, Fred. Listen —give me a ring sometime. In North Hollywood Directory. Name's Barbara Allerson. A, as in Aphrodite."

Nebel got out of the car. "Fill it up," he said to the Shell attendant, a kid in a buckskin shirt and tight levis. He looked down the length of the main drag of Ten Palms, baking in the late afternoon sunlight, down between blurred glares of gambling casinos, bars, pizza and hotdog and beer signs, drugs stores. His eyes were bloodshot and there was a stubborn set to his jaw. "Check the oil. May need a quart of special X. Check the brakes. I'll be back after while."

The kid unlocked the gas cap. "Hear about the plane crash this morning?"

"Yes, I did."

"Movie actress supposed to have got it too. Private plane, guy named Weldon. He lives a little way from here. Plane went down just over on the hill there. Brought seven in here all at once."

Nebel didn't say anything. He didn't feel much of anything now either, except a curious sense of injustice. If he didn't know Luella well enough to know she wouldn't have been the seventh passenger on that plane, then he didn't know Luella at all. Didn't know *any*thing about Luella. If you could marry someone, be married to them a year, and not know anything at all about them, not one thing, then you couldn't trust yourself either, not in the least.

"Who were the seven passengers?" Nebel asked.

"They don't know yet," the kid said. "They're over at the mortuary putting them together. Who would want to work in a mortuary? I wouldn't."

"Where is it—the mortuary?"

The kid told him. It was two blocks away, a block off the main street. Nebel walked over there where the chapel nestled next to the church. A crowd loitered. Someone had brought up a hotdog and an ice-cream wagon.

Someone said to someone else, "Steve Myerson saw the crash all right, in fact, he was almost number eight. The plane darned near landed on his roof. He reported it, and now he's a tevee star. Been on tevee and everything. Like a celebration for Steve. Ain't seen him so loaded since last Fourth of July. He's really livin'."

"Well, that's logical," someone answered. "He ain't been in town without the old lady since last Fourth."

But Nebel was walking up to the khaki-clad officer standing before the chapel door.

"Name's Fred Nebel," he said. The officer shuffled his boots, and looked over the top of Nebel's head. "Are all of them identified yet, officer?"

The officer shook his head. "All of them but one, Mr. Nebel."

"There's a possibility that my wife may have—"

"I know. I've got a list of the seven guests who probably made

that flight, Mr. Nebel. Got it right here."

"I know my wife's name is on that list. But I'm equally sure she didn't make that flight," Nebel said.

The officer shifted his boots and then wiped his fat sweating face with a soggy bandanna. He looked over the top of Nebel's head and didn't say anything.

"You've identified six of them, but not my wife," Nebel said. "Isn't that right?"

The officer dug a wet folded paper from his shirt pocket and looked at it. "Your wife isn't on the list."

"What about the seventh one then?" Nebel asked. "Is it a man or a woman?"

"It's—a woman," the officer said. "And you could be right, Mr. Nebel," he added quickly, "it may not be your wife at all. We don't know who it is yet."

"I know it isn't my wife," Nebel said. The setting sun burned like pins in his eyeballs.

The officer shook hs head, embarrassed and hardly able to speak. "Well, we got a guest list from a Miss Barbara Allerson over at the Weldon place. There were eight guests there, and Miss Allerson didn't go. Your wife was one of the seven. Of course, I guess some one else could have been number seven, but on the other hand it doesn't seem—"

"I happen to know my wife couldn't have been on that plane," Nebel said.

"I sure hope you're right, Mr. Nebel. They can't find anything at all to identify this number seven. Completely unrecognizable, and no rings, or any identification found, nothing, just nothing at all. They'll have to check with dentists and doctors, check for dental X-rays and broken bones. That's the only way."

"We were married a year," Nebel said. "My wife had no dental work or anything like that done, no broken bones."

"Well, Mr. Nebel, we'd like a little information. Just in case, you understand. So we can check. Where did she come from? Was she born here? If we could check in other towns, where she may have had dental work done, bones set. Well—we can make absolutely sure it isn't your wife, that way, you see, Mr. Nebel? Could you give us information of that kind?"

Nebel hesitated.

"I don't guess you've heard from her since the crash," the officer asked uneasily. "Or you don't know where else she might be, or something?"

"I soon will know," Nebel said. "But I'll give you what information I can." The officer brought out a black notebook, and a pencil. "Her maiden name is Luella Sawyer. She came from Lakeville, Arkansas. She had a stepfather until she was five, then spent the rest of

her life until she was eighteen in an orphanage in Lakeville. Then I believe she went to work in a bank there. Three years later she came to Los Angeles."

Nebel felt a bit dizzy. He started down the steps, hearing the officer mumbling something. But he paid no attention and went on.

He sat in the bar drinking beer and listening to the rhythm of slot machine handles for a long time. He called home several times, but there was no answer. He should, he told himself, have stayed home. He would have been there when she called in, or drove in.

He sat at a corner table and looked into his memory.

He had been lonely and afraid and then he met her at that party and married her three days later . . . and that morning after the first night of their honeymoon in Miami, there she was on the balcony, stark naked, calmly feeding the pigeons. Someone called the cops. Nebel managed to convince them that Luella was a sleep walker. That was the beginning. The beginning of pranks, irresponsible behavior of a complex and unbelievable variety. Finding her gone, never knowing where, or when she would be back. Calling hospitals, police stations. A child in a lovely woman's body. And how would anyone have guessed? But afterward you love, feel responsible. It's like having the responsibility for something lovely and precious and helpless. None of the anxiety and pain and irritations mattered to him now.

She was here behind his closed eyes the way she had been the first time he saw her, radiant and always young and reckless and lighting up lonely dark rooms. She was with him now, her breath on his face, her hands and lips caressing him, the distinct lavender scent of her perfume all around, her warmth entering into him. Am I my brother's, my sister's keeper?

"How about another, sir?"

He looked up at the waitress. "Sure," he said.

And for the first time in a long time he thought about his first marriage, his first wife. He remembered everything and he remembered with sharp clarity her warm gentle strength, the color of her eyes, and how she had waved and blew him a kiss that evening before walking through the falling snow to catch a streetcar to her mother's house because her mother had the flu. He even remembered hearing the scream, and without a shirt running through the snow and seeing her there a dark sooty wet blob under the wheels of a truck. "Oh come on, Fred," she had said. "I can't, I've got to study," he had said. And all he had remembered for years after that was that if he had gone with her it would never have happened.

It would never happen again, he had said. He remembered saying that too, over and over as he walked all night in the snow. And for years and years it had not happened.

It hadn't happened this time either.

But wishing didn't make it so. The idea that it did was an old myth to which Nebel had never subscribed. Everyone else assumed that the seventh body in the chapel of A. Ribesto was that of Luella Nebel. There was every reason for this assumption. And the sole fact for his assuming that it was not Luella would hardly convince anyone else. Barbara knew that Luella was dead. Luella had been at Weldon's. There were only seven guests other than Barbara. By all logic, the seventh unidentified body at the Chapel was Luella.

But Nebel insisted that it couldn't be. Or was he insisting that it shouldn't be? Was he afraid to face the truth? He would feel responsible, just as he had for his first wife, and he knew that he couldn't bear it again.

Luella wore several rings. She wore a necklace and earrings. She always carried a wallet. The searchers could easily have overlooked something. But he wouldn't. If anything of Luella's was up there in the wreckage, he would see it, and he would know it.

He left the bar. The sun had set as he got his car and the directions on how to reach the crash site and drove up into the foothills. As he drove over the winding road through the clear moonlight, he knew something else. That he wanted to be up there alone where those people had died. There was a strange, unexplainable feeling that, up there, alone, he would come nearer to knowing the truth. He had to know.

And in any case, when he found out the truth, whatever it was, he preferred to be alone when he found it.

The moon seemed balanced on the crest of the arid hills. Nebel looked awhile through the wreckage with his flashlight, then sat on a rock and felt the slow steady push of the desert wind. It whispered around him through charred grass, blackened rocks, bits of molten wreckage, tatters that were sooty and formless.

He had searched through the wreckage and found nothing. And he kept telling himself that he wouldn't find anything, so why go on looking? It was ridiculous. Why doubt his own powerful hunch? Go on back to Ten Palms. They've probably already identified that seventh victim as someone else. Go back and call home, go home, Luella's probably there waiting and afraid.

And if it isn't that way, if it's the other way, you'll find that out soon enough, too. You can't be ab-

solutely sure of everything all the time.

Something moved, a sound, behind the blackened boulders. His heart pounded as he stood up and he seemed to catch a whiff of Luella's perfume mixed with burned earth, seered grass, dead waste.

He walked quietly toward the sound, leaned over the top of the rock and flicked on his flashlight. Like an animal fixed and hypnotized by such a sudden glare in the night, the man rose and faced into the light, blinking. His face a dirty grayish pallor. And he was breathing heavily, showing a toothy grin at something nameless and unseen.

Nebel switched off the flashlight. However, he could still see vividly, the face, the long creases in the cheeks like scar furrows, the thick shoulders, ragged sleeves. The torn shirt, the missing buttons. The hands and wrists of both arms badly and recently burned. The raw redness of the burns still shone in the moonlight like the claws of crabs.

And out of his hand those buttons falling on the rock as the man straightened up, startled.

"Just poking around here you know," the man said. "You scared me. "

"Sorry," Nebel said. "You found some buttons?"

"Few little old buttons, that's all. Just sort of looking things over. It's practically in my backyard anyway now. Name's Steve Myerson. I saw it happen, whole thing. Live down the hill a piece. Thought it was coming right down on my head. It was hot, hotter than hell. I could feel it like a furnace blast all the way down the hill. You looking for something?"

"Yes I am. They've identified six of the seven down at Ribesto's Chapel. The seventh one hasn't been identified yet."

"Hasn't?"

"No. No identification of any kind. So I was looking, seeing if maybe something had been overlooked."

"Well, they know who it is all right," Myerson said. "It's just a question of verifying it I guess. They know who the seven was that went up in that plane, but I guess they got to be sure."

Nebel shivered then. The long howling wail of a dog came from a little way down the hill. Myerson swore and slid over the rock and looked down the hill. He was big and crouching a little, making a gnarled shadow under the moon. "That damned dog. Been howling and howling. I'll kill the mutt, so help me. My old lady pulled stakes, you know, up and left me, and that dog's been howling for her."

Nebel saw the shine of Myerson's eyes in which there was no warmth, no trust, but a naked fear that had gone off and on like a light bulb. The dog gave another long wail.

"Well, I got to get back down to my shack," Myerson said. When he started walking away, Nebel walked behind him. Myerson stopped.

"Maybe you got something to drink down there," Nebel said. "I sure could use one."

Myerson looked at him. Finally he said in a kind of mumble, "You a detective, a reporter maybe?"

"No. I just have a very special interest in that seventh unidentified woman whose body they found up here this afternoon. You see, I happen to know it isn't who they think it is."

"I see," Myerson said. "Sure, you come on down for a snort or two. I got some brandy down there, some whiskey too. Brought it up from town today."

"Thanks," Nebel said. He followed Myerson's big but noiseless padding movement down the hill, along a narrow winding path through stunted sage.

Myerson was saying, "I keep goats. They said over the radio I was a sheepherder. I ain't no sheepherder. Goats, and they're a headache. Sometimes I don't know if I'll make it go. But they's money in goats' milk."

"Didn't your wife like goats, Myerson?"

Myerson began swearing and hurling rocks down the hill at a grove of cottonwoods where the dog kept howling. "Shut up, Queeny, or I'll put a bullet in you! You hear!"

They had moved past peeled railings to where a small two-roomed shack threw a pale, sickly, coal oil light through an open door. Myerson opened the door wider. "Go on in, and make yourself comfortable. Ain't much, but it's home." Myerson chuckled.

"I've heard dogs howl like that before," Nebel said. "Always for somebody dead."

Myerson grabbed at the wall and leaped crouching across the path of lamplight. A double-bitted ax swung up above Myerson's mad, flushed face.

Nebel moved out of the light. His stomach felt as if a rope were squeezing around it. "Killing me won't help you any," he said. Running would hardly help Nebel much either. He didn't know where the paths went, and it was steep, rocky terrain. "They'll find out who that seventh body is, or was. That it's your wife's."

"They won't find out from you though. Not now, you—you—snooping—"

The ax whistled around and Nebel fell back and the wall of the shack held him as if he were pinioned. The ax came back like a snake's head poised. Nebel slid down the side of the boards, then swung under the ax, rolled and felt his feet slipping in gravel as he tried to regain his feet. Myer-

son's bulk bent over him, the double-blade ax silhouetted against the moon.

In that moment lying there, fear boiled something latent out of Nebel. And hate was like a fire coiling in him. It was all the more violent because it had been so long delayed, like a charge of dynamite going up, a roaring flood breaking down a drywash, a lightning stroke out of an empty sky. It broke suddenly and completely. And he came up with a hoarse cry under the down-swinging ax. He caught the handle of it on his shoulder and grabbed Myerson's wrist with both hands, felt the burned skin slipping under his fingers like the skin of a rotten peach.

He dropped his right hand and smashed Myerson in the stomach. Myerson stumbled and gasped, sobbed slightly, and tried to get the ax up again. Nebel smashed him twice in the mouth. Myerson stumbled back, flopped against the side of the shack, slipped down to his hands and knees. Nebel stomped on his wrist and the ax slid down the hill. When Myerson came up, Nebel pounded away at him and, finally, laced his hands together, brought them down across the back of Myerson's neck.

Then he picked up the ax.

An hour later, Myerson confessed everything to the sheriff in Ten Palms. He had seen the crash and the flames and had beaten his wife unconscious, then pushed her up there in a wheelbarrow and dumped her into the fire. Everyone knew that Mrs. Myerson had been threatening to leave her husband for some time and her disappearance would have aroused no suspicion. Myerson had figured the bodies would be completely burned, or at least that it would be assumed that seven passengers had been on the plane. She had regained her senses long enough to put up a terrible struggle, had torn Myerson's shirt, ripped the buttons off. His hands and wrists had been badly burned.

"I had a strong hunch my wife couldn't have been that seventh passenger," Nebel said. "Yet there were seven passengers. Then I saw Myerson up there picking up those buttons, and noticed that buttons were missing from his shirt. I got another hunch then when he talked about his wife leaving him. And seeing those burned hands. What really did it was that dog howling not for someone gone away, but for someone dead."

As Nebel drove into the driveway of his house in Van Nuys, he noticed that the light in the front room was on. He didn't drive into the garage. He parked in the driveway, then walked across the front yard to the door and opened it.

"Freddy, darling!"

He saw Luella standing there in a wispy negligee, and he knew she appeared very appealing in it, but Nebel didn't take a very close look. He heard her giggling and swinging her arms in a little dance, and he felt the same hot coiling in his stomach and his hands clenched, but then the tension went away. It might be some time yet before any such rage as he had known this afternoon would come back. Maybe it never would.

He went into the bedroom without saying anything, threw a few items into an overnight bag, and walked back across the living room to the door. She ran toward him, then stopped. She was still laughing, but it sounded grotesque and unreal. He saw a kind of savagery beneath the giggling prankster face, something venomous and unforgiving in her eyes even as she laughed more shrilly and yelled,

"But, darling, it's April Fool's day!"

"I know," Nebel said. "I just remembered it as I drove up to the house."

He shut the door.

He drove through the still darkness of the housing tract toward the bright lights of Ventura Boulevard. Familiarity might blunt perception. But a sick need could blind you to reality.

He parked by the Owl Drug Store and went inside to the phone booth. Kids make life bearable for themselves, he thought, by pretense and fantasy, by this facility for self-deception. And it was possible to go on being a kid for years. But it was also deadly. Deadly to stay young too long.

He looked up the number in the North Hollywood Directory. Then he dialed HOllywood 7-1313. "Hello," he said after a sleepy voice answered. "Is this Aphrodite?"

Every Sunday

Don't miss the most unusual and exciting suspense television show of the week—ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS. Every Sunday. Check your favorite TV program-guide for the time this top-rated mystery show reaches your area.

When Leon Whitehall had the heart attack which forced him into retirement, the outlook for the future wasn't entirely bleak—especially for Mrs. Whitehall. A handsome matron in her fifties, she put her hands on her still-shapely hips, rolled up her mink sleeves, and pitched into battle. She was going to make Leon's retirement-years a time of happiness and peace, if it cost them every nickel of the sizeable pension and trust fund he took away from the United Motor Corporation, of which he had been First Vice President.

This light epic concerns a man who has both a heart attack and a wife. The latter proves more cumbersome than the former and, obviously, will not respond to routine medication.

by O. H. Leslie

"First of all," she said, "we're going to tear off that horrid old front porch. Nobody, just nobody has front porches any more; you just look in *Better Homes and Garden—"*

"But, Louise, I sort of liked that old porch," Leon pouted, making his round face and pink scalp look more like his baby pictures than ever. "It's a nice place to sit and read the paper . . ."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Whitehall said briskly. "We'll have much better places to sit. Patios and fieldstone terraces and a sunroom with jalousies. And we'll redo the windows, get new wallpaper. And—oh, Lord, there's so *much* to do, Leon!"

She leaned back in her chair, weary but glowing, as if the tasks had already been accomplished and she was awaiting her husband's praise. But poor Leon only looked glum.

"Don't you *want* a lovely home, Leon? A place to spend your declin—I mean, your retirement-years

in tranquility? You know that you're a very—sick—man."

"I know," her husband said sadly.

"Peace and quiet," Mrs. Whitehall said sonorously. "Shade trees, a fireplace, stereophonic records. And no upsets. You know what Dr. Middlemark said about upsets."

"Yes, Louise."

"Don't you *want* it, Leon?"

Leon Whitehall, possibly reasoning that he would never attain Dr. Middlemark's goal unless he assented, said:

"Yes, Louise."

"I knew it," she said comfortably. "I knew you wanted it as much as I did, Leon. We'll start first thing next week."

Mrs. Whitehall started, and in the most logical place—the lavender-hued office of an interior decorator named Merwin Dumont. Dumont was a thin, soulful man with Valentino eyes and gray hair that swooped back from his forehead like the wing of a bird. From the moment Mrs. Whitehall explained her ideas, and saw his bright-eyed enthusiasm, she knew she had come to the right doorstep. He visited the Whitehall homestead that week end, and began to create.

"The mood, the mood," he said, putting a hand over his eyes. "I can see the mood now. Beige subtleties and vivid electrics . . . elegance and informality . . . I can see it!"

Leon, sitting in the only comfortable chair in the house—a boxy red-leather he had owned even as a bachelor—watched the activity but saw nothing.

"I want splashes of color," Dumont said thrillingly. "Absolute splashes, *explosions*. I want stark colonial furniture, simply *filthy* with brass. And carpets—" He waved his hand, indicating broadloom to the ceiling—"*Fields* of carpets!"

"Say," Leon ventured feebly. "How much is all this exploding going to cost us?"

The planners looked at him with pity. Leon said no more.

He said nothing when the reconstruction work began, the workmen irreverently ripped the nails out of his beloved front porch, when the walls were torn apart to make room for naked planes of glass, when the painting began, and new furniture trickled into the house, when the carpeting was laid. In the hectic days that followed, he complained only once—when he sat gingerly on a fragile Early American chair and heard his wife bellow:

"Leon! What are you doing?"

"Sitting down, of course. Why?"

"On *that* chair? I thought you knew better than that. That chair's for *show!*"

It was almost three months later, when all the decorating had been

completed, that Mrs. Whitehall first expressed dissatisfaction to Merwin Dumont.

"I don't know what it is," she said, across the luncheon table. "We've done everything, but the house isn't *right*."

Dumont sniffed. "I must confess you're correct."

"What could it be? Is it the wall color?"

"No, the colors are perfect. Exquisite!"

"The carpets, then. Is the beige —*beigy* enough?"

"Couldn't be beigier."

"Then what is it, Merwin?"

The decorator brooded, the Valentino eyes suffering.

"Mrs. Dumont, I don't wish to offend you—"

"Yes?"

"But in the bedroom—those old hunting prints of your husband's. They look simply atrocious with the puce walls. In the den—that monstrous elk's head. In the living room—" He shuddered. "That ghastly red chair . . ."

"You're right, of course," Mrs. Whitehall nodded. "But Leon's a fanatic about those things."

The decorator shrugged. "Voila," he said simply.

Mrs. Whitehall braced herself. "Say no more, Merwin. I'll speak to my husband tonight."

No confrontation scene in Tolstoi was ever more impassioned than the one which took place in the Whitehall home that evening. At first Leon was disbelieving. Then, he raged and fumed and sputtered. Then he began to plead—if not for the hunting prints and the elk's head—for the big red chair he loved so much. But he hadn't reckoned on Mrs. Whitehall's cunning. Instead of rebuttals, she used tears.

"To think how I've *slaved* to give you a home you can be proud of," she said. "To think how I've *sacrificed*—"

"Now, Louise—"

"And this is your gratitude. This is how you thank me!"

"Louise, listen—"

The victory was won by only a few drops of the salty stuff on Mrs. Whitehall's cheek. In the morning, a pick-up truck took prints, elk, and the big red chair away.

Yet still Mrs. Whitehall wasn't happy.

"Oh, Merwin!" she cried, poised on the couch in his apartment. "I'm just going out of my *mind* trying to figure it out. It's just not my dream house yet."

"There, there, sweet," Dumont said.

"It's just not fair!" She wiped away a tear (genuine) and put her head on his shoulder. "What's wrong with it, Merwin?"

The decorator frowned. "Well, we did what we could. We re-

placed everything that didn't belong. Frankly, my darling, there can be only one answer."

Mrs. Whitehall stared at him.

"Leon," she whispered.

Dumont shrugged. "What else is left?"

"Leon!" the woman said, the dawn of realization in her eyes. "Of course! That's been it all along. Not just the chair, or the elk's head. It's Leon. He just doesn't *fit* in that house!"

"As a decorator," Dumont said delicately, "I must agree."

"Why, he's as wrong as he can be. Those funny little legs of his. And the way those *suits* fit him. And that bald little head . . ."

"He's just all wrong," Dumont said gravely.

"*Completely* wrong. He's *ludicrous* in that house, Merwin. He belongs in our *old* house. With the porch—"

"And the hunting prints."

"And the elk's head. And that ratty old chair."

"There you are," Dumont said. "But what can you do about it? You can't send a pick-up truck for Mr. Whitehall."

"Can't we?" Louise said thoughtfully.

"What, dear?"

"I mean, can't we, really? After all, Leon isn't a well man, Merwin. That's why he retired. Why, Dr. Middlemark told me himself that any shock—any shock at all—would make Leon's heart go phfft."

"Tut, tut," Dumont said, noncommittally.

"If only there was a shock," Mrs. Whitehall mused. "Something that really frightened him. Can you think of anything like that, Merwin?"

"Oh, well," the decorator yawned.

"Merwin, you're not really *interested*."

"Of course, darling. But it *is* your house."

A motherly smile crossed the woman's face. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking *I'm* not thinking about you. But of course I am, Merwin. After all, I don't want that wonderful house to be *empty*."

The decorator's face changed. It glowed. It shone.

"Have you ever," he said enthusiastically, "considered dropping light bulbs?"

That night, while Leon sat stiff-necked in one of the few chairs permitted him, Mrs. Whitehall tiptoed behind him and went into the asphalt-tiled kitchen. Then she lifted the 100-watt light bulb to shoulder height, and released it. It exploded like a bomb on the floor, and she gave an involuntary shriek of surprise.

"What was that?" Leon asked casually. "Break a glass, dear?"

She came out to look at him. "No," she said. "Light bulb."

"Oh," Leon said.

"Leon, have you had your ears tested lately?"

"What's that, dear?"

"Nothing," Mrs. Whitehall said, gritting her teeth.

That night, at two in the morning, she leaned across the space between their twin beds and shook him violently.

"Huh? Whuzzit? Wha?" Leon said, blinking in the darkness.

"Leon!" she whispered hoarsely. "I think I hear a burglar downstairs!"

"I didn't hear nothin'," he muttered, face in pillow.

"Leon, I tell you I *heard* him. I heard him!"

He grumbled, threw off the covers, and jammed his small feet into the slippers near his bed. Then he padded to the doorway, stuck out his head, and shouted:

"Hey! Anybody down there?"

When no answer came, he nodded with satisfaction, and returned to bed.

"Leon!"

"I told you nobody was down there!"

Frustrated, but not yet daunted, Mrs. Whitehall got out of bed herself, and went down the stairs into the living room. Of course, she knew there was no intruder; it was only part of her imperfect plan. But if Leon thought there was—

She threw back her head and screamed lustily, at the top of her formidable lungs.

A moment later, she saw Leon's head appear in the upper hallway.

"Did you call me, Louise?" he said.

"No," she rasped. "Go back to sleep."

The next morning, weary-eyed from an introspective night, Mrs. Whitehall leaned across the breakfast table and said:

"Leon, do you still have that old gun of yours?"

"Huh? What gun?"

"The hunting gun. The one you shot the elk with."

"Oh, that. I guess it's still in the attic. Why?"

"No reason," Mrs. Whitehall lied.

That afternoon, she rummaged through the attic until she found the gun, a venerable shotgun. Fortunately, she had once learned its mysteries during a skeet-shooting season when she was still a debutante, and was able to load it from the box of ammunition stored beside it. She brought it down stairs, her hand casual around the trigger.

"Oh, Leon," she said. "Look what I found today."

"Louise! For God's sake, be careful with the thing."

"Oh, I don't think it's *loaded,*" she said cheerfully and squeezed the trigger, making sure the shot would scatter against the rough fieldstone fireplace where it would do no perceptible damage. The blast was much louder than she expected, and the shot came closer to Leon's pink scalp than she in-

tended. But worst of all, the effect wasn't at all what she'd hoped for.

"Are you all right?" Leon said. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt!" she said angrily.

"That old shotgun has quite a kickback. Sure you didn't get bruised or anything."

"For heaven's *sake,* Leon—I almost blasted your head off. Why are you so worried about me?"

Leon blanched.

"You did almost hit me, didn't you? That was very careless of you, Louise. I . . . I think I'd better lie down . . ."

He walked off, and his wife watched him hopefully. But by nightfall, he was in good spirits again—and, worst of all, in good health.

"It's just no use," she told Merwin Dumont, with a gesture of surrender. "He's simply shock-resistant, like those watches. Nothing scares him, Merwin."

"Tut, tut," the decorator said.

"The only time he showed the *least* bit of upset was when I fired that stupid shotgun at his head. And most of *that* was because he thought the recoil might have hurt *me.*"

"A very devoted man," Dumont said.

"Yes," she said in disgust.

The decorator paddled his fingers together.

"Perhaps your answer is there," he said.

"What?"

"In your husband's devotion. He took these other shocks in stride—but if *you* were endangered—if he thought something had happened to *you*—"

"To me? I don't understand."

"Well, if he thought you had sustained some injury — perhaps even a fatal accident — the shock might accomplish what you're after."

"*We're* after," Mrs. Whitehall said.

Dumont coughed. "Of course, we. Now I recall one incident, happened to a friend of mine. He, too, had an unfortunate heart condition. When he came home and discovered his wife dead—she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills, poor child—the shock killed him just as effectively."

"But I can't fake anything like that—"

"Nothing like that, perhaps. But if you could devise something equally dramatic . . ."

They fell silent, deep in speculation.

Finally, Mrs. Whitehall said, triumphantly:

"I have it!"

"You do?"

"Yes. I'll *hang* myself!"

Leon Whitehall, even in his retirement days, retained some of his

old habits, remnants of his business life. One of these was setting the alarm for seven-thirty, and rising promptly when its insistent ring announced another dawn. Mrs. Whitehall watched him set the clock that night, and in the morning, rose half an hour before the clamor started.

She went quietly downstairs, and sat before the early American desk in the hall. Then, on a sheet of her best stationery, she wrote:

Dear Leon—
Forgive me for this. These thirty years with you have been heaven. But now the thought that you might go first and leave me alone is too much to bear. Forgive me, my darling, when you see what is in the basement.

Louise

She folded the note carefully, and returned upstairs. Leon was still deep in slumber, snoring lightly. She placed the note on the rounded paunch that protruded under the sheet, and went below again. In the kitchen, under the countertop, she removed the brown paper parcel she had brought from a shopping tour in town. Then she opened the door that led to the still unfinished basement.

She opened the parcel, revealing a length of heavy brown rope, its end already expertly tied into the ever-popular hangman's noose. Then she looked about the bare basement, and realized that she lacked one item to complete her project—something to stand on. There was nothing in the basement, so she sighed and returned to the first floor. A moment later, she was clumping down the basement stairs with a slat-backed Early American chair borrowed from the dining room.

She climbed up on the chair and threw the end of the rope around a steampipe. The knot she made to secure it was awkward and lumpy, but it served its purpose. Then lightly, she fitted the noose around her neck.

Standing on tiptoe, with her head drooping to one side on her chest, her eyes shut, her tongue hanging from her mouth, she rehearsed the pose.

Then she waited, patiently, until she heard the faint sound upstairs. *Tingle-lingle-lingle-click!* The alarm had rung, and Mr. Whitehall had stopped its jangling. Any moment now, he would discover the note.

She waited, still patient.

Then she heard his voice.

"Louise?"

Now! She struck the pose, one hand holding firmly to the loop of tough brown rope to prevent any mishaps. She rolled her head on her shoulder, until it had just the right droop. She stuck out her tongue, and shut her eyes in the resignation of death. She stretched her body as far as it would go, the

tips of her shoes barely touching the chair bottom.

She heard the lumbering footstep of her husband, heard him crash and collide with the furniture, and inwardly cursed his clumsiness. Then she heard the basement door open, and his steps on the wooden stairs.

He was in front of her, walking around her, taking in the grisly sight. She thought she could hear his little heart pounding, thundering, getting ready for its last terrible effort, and then—

There was only silence.

"Tut, tut, tut," she heard. "Who would have thought it? . . . of all people."

And then she heard him giggle.

"How do you like that?" she then heard Leon say. "Using one of her best chairs, too. She'd *kill* me if I ever did that."

Then he was chuckling, and she knew that the plan had gone wrong. She couldn't decide what to do next. She wanted to open her eyes and admit the hoax, but she couldn't be sure—

"Her good chair," Leon said.

Then she heard the sounds that she instantaneously interpreted as, "He's kicked the chair out from under me," for she felt herself dangling.

"Guess she can't yell at me now," he giggled.

"Leon!" Mrs. Whitehall cried, no longer caring about her plan. "Leon, let me down!"

He didn't seem to hear her. "Guess I better call the police," he muttered, heading for the stairs.

"Leon!" Mrs. Whitehall gasped, struggling to keep the noose from tightening about her throat, kicking her legs in the air. "Leon, for God's sake—"

"Wonder if that place still has my chair?" she heard him say, as he started up the steps.

"LEON!" Mrs. Whitehall shrieked, her shoes flying off her feet, her whole body writhing with the effort to stay alive. "Leon, Leon, Le—"

Dr. Middlemark pulled the stethoscope from his ears, and said:

"Well, it's remarkable, Leon, really remarkable. After that terrible thing happened, I would have expected your condition to be a lot worst. But frankly, you're in pretty good shape."

"It's the peace and quiet," Leon Whitehall said, buttoning his shirt, and patting the red leather arms of his chair. "It's the peace and quiet that does it, doctor."

MEDITATIONS

upon a murder

by Donald Martin

I HAD BEEN contemplating the murder of my roommate for some time. This was not from any particular dislike of Charles, merely that the whole idea began as a thought in an odd, and I presume unguarded moment, and that it intrigued me from the very first and continued to intrigue me.

Charles was not an especially offensive person (our victims seldom are), but he was something of a fool and undeniably a person of little consequence destined from the first to be a failure. He was certainly a consistent failure in his studies. (One of his favorite sayings was, "My marks are so low they're threatening to sprout roots.") But he could afford to be indifferent to his academic anemia because his father was a mid-Westerner of some wealth who had accepted Charles as the innate failure that he was and planned eventually to have him absorbed into the family business.

After rooming with him for a semester I gradually developed a feeling of contempt for Charles.

Seeing the same person day in and day out cannot help but grate upon the nerves. The very fact that I could sit with him for hours in the evenings and think about murdering him was, I think, indicative of the esteem in which I held him. He would sit in his chair across the room reading a sports magazine, utterly oblivious of the world which had passed him by but which, he seemed to know, would be back to retrieve him. I conceived of Charles as finally succeeding, attaining his apogee as a corpse. I saw him as making a fine corpse, taking that admirable, mediocre, lackadaisical and com-

The point made by our story is that the close proximity of individuals, too long continued, may lead not only to murder, but to irritability. There is the cure of privacy—but this of course is drastic, for humans do tend to be gregarious.

pletely unfettered spirit to the grave with him.

I had been working extremely hard at my studies at that time. Perhaps Charles' jejune presence was unnerving. The study of medicine is, I think, exceeded in its arduousness, puzzlements and abstruse problems only by the study for the ministry. In fact one of my professors suggested that I go away for a semester and take a rest, the strain was that apparent, but I refused. I had worked too hard, dreamed too long about being able to practice medicine, so that delay in attaining my goal by even a few months was unbearable to me. Of course I was working hard, but I believed that a man's capacities for work had no limitations, that any alleged limitations were imagined and that a man could go on for infinite cerebral distances. That was my precise conception of the mind: infinite.

I soon found, however, that thinking of Charles as a corpse was a most relaxing and stimulating diversion. After closing my books for the evening, I would lean back in my chair and stare at him. It is amazing how when you are close to a person, that is living with him for some appreciable length of time, his importance as a human being shrinks and you are not at all adverse to thinking about murdering him. At least that is the way it was with me. I could never have thought of murdering a perfect stranger because I had never had anything to do with that stranger, and to even think of harming such a person would be inconceivable. But with someone that I knew it was different. When I was younger, and living at home, I often thought of murdering my brothers or my father or my mother. Often I had it planned down to the finest detail. Once I took my youngest brother ice skating on the pond near where I knew there was a break in the ice, just to see how close I could actually come to the break. With a bit more urging he would have skated there, but I desisted because the very closeness of death (and the knowledge that I could have achieved it) was sufficiently exhilarating. So the more familiar I became with Charles the more I could see him as a corpse, alive one moment, dead the next . . . as simple, as complete, as irrevocable as that.

He was a light-hearted and at times likeable chap. He had no financial cares; I had many. Once when I was stuck for the rent he got it up for me and never said a word.

"I'll pay it back," I said.

"Forget it," he told me, standing in the middle of the room and taking imaginary pitching windups and strides and deliveries. (He had been an excellent pitcher in high school, so he said.) "Just give me a free aspirin sometime

when you're a big shot surgeon."

I did not plot it to be the great classic perfect crime of our time. It was none of that. I had read too many stories about would-be perfect crimes. The criminal had made clinical studies of every detail and still had been caught. My stand was, to a point, fatalistic. I believed that you were going to make certain unpreventable mistakes, leave several unclipped threads no matter how meticulous you were, and that it was simply a matter of how astute the investigating policemen were. No crime could be perfect, perfection being of course an unattainable entity, a brew as yet without a recipe. So, gambling against the perceptive faculties of the law, I planned Charles' murder in a general way, not concerning myself with masses of detail.

One evening Charles was in a rather glum mood, something quite uncommon for him. I was at the typewriter typing some papers for class, a tedious work because, in order to pick up some extra money, I often made a half dozen carbon copies and sold them to my classmates. I noted that Charles was unusually quiet this evening. That, too, can be annoying when it is inharmonious. I stopped typing and turned to him.

"What seems to be your trouble?"

"It's nothing organic," he said.

"Is the trouble in your father's letter?" I asked. He had received a long letter that morning.

"Yes," Charles said glumly. "That's a pretty good diagnosis. He's unhappy with my work and wants me to come home."

"To put you to work?"

He nodded. Poor fellow, he had a streak of laziness in him that was a veritable groove.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, not without some concern, for I was not anxious to see my prime victim fly off.

"I don't know. I've been stalling him for months. I've used up just about every dodge."

"I suppose he's threatening you with financial extinction?"

He nodded. I had never seen him so unhappy, poor chap. It depressed me. Suddenly it came upon me, all at once. It was as startling as a revelation. I even had the thought at the moment that Charles wouldn't mind what I was going to do—not that this was going to be any act of mercy, no murder is ever that; these so-called acts of mercy are merely the subtle releases of certain stormy inhibitions. I got up and—I remember everything distinctly, it is all clear and sharply defined in my memory—walked to the other side of the room and picked up a rather Gothic-looking candlestick which we kept on the bookcase merely for decorative purposes, turned it upside down in my hand and approached Charles from the back, my eyes fixed upon his unsuspecting head. I raised the candlestick

and brought it down on his head with all my strength. Much to my surpise, and consternation, instead of crumbling, he leaped up, staggering forward on drunken legs, holding his head, reeling around the room, his eyes wide and glazed, filled with dying. He rammed into a table, upsetting it, sending a glass shattering upon the floor. Then he stopped, his body drawing magnificently to its full height, arched backward and then broke, collapsing, striking the floor with a rush.

I stood transfixed for a moment, staring at him. Then I saw the blood. It was leaking from a gash just above the wrist that had been made by his falling on the broken glass. For some unaccountable reason the blood terrified me, unnerved me. I dropped the candlestick and rushed to him. His eyes were still wide open but were vacant, all semblance of life had passed out of them, but still the blood. ran from his wrist. I reached up and grabbed some sheets of paper and pressed one of them down on the wound. Then I reached up and flicked off the light. Crouching there in the dim light of the room, I pulled away the paper and I could make out that the bleeding had stopped. I took the bloodied paper, tore it into bits and flushed it down the toilet. I washed a few spots of blood from my hands and went back into the room. The stillness was positively tingling. I remember standing there for a long time, listening to the awesome stillness.

Then I set about to complete the last phase of my task. I picked up my late roommate and carried him to the back door. Ours was a basement apartment and the back door opened onto a yard that was adjacent to an alleyway across the street from which was the park. It was quite late now and I had few qualms about carrying Charles. I moved with him through the yard, squeezed through the shaggy hedges into the alley and came out to the street. The street was empty I would have to gamble that no one was watching from a window. Carrying him in my arms now, he'd been slung over my shoulder before, I crossed the street and went into the park and in a secluded place put him down where, I was certain, he would be found and considered the victim of a mugging. I cleaned the money from his pockets, removed his watch (which I disposed of down a sewer) and came back to the apartment. Trembling with excitement, I righted the fallen table, swept up the glass, washed the blood from the linoleum and went to bed, waiting for the police to come in the morning, waiting to defy them.

They came earlier than I expected. It was about seven o'clock and I had just gotten up. Looking at Charles' empty bed made me sad for a moment, but only for a

moment. The doorbell rang then and, straightening myself and not without a bit of rebellious pride and anticipation, I went and opened the door. I found myself staring into the face of a detective, a plainclothesman. It was not an unpleasant face, but a trifle cynical. He was bored by crime. He identified himself, opening a wallet and snapping it shut with a tired and practiced gesture, and he and I sat down and talked. Almost immediately his eye fell upon the candlestick which had resumed its place on the bookcase and kept returning to it as we spoke. He told me that my roommate had been found in the park bludgeoned to death. I expressed great horror, naturally, but I did not indulge in any false theatrics, for Charles was, after all, merely a roommate.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I was asked.

"Yesterday morning," I said. "He left early and that was the last I saw of him."

"Weren't you concerned?"

"No, he often stayed out an entire evening. He was a bit of a playboy. In fact I thought you were he when the bell rang."

"You say you didn't see him at all yesterday?"

"Only in the morning."

"Where were you last night?"

"I spent the evening here," I said. "Working. Typing these papers."

"These very papers?" he asked, indicating what I had typed.

"Yes. These very papers."

"Last night?"

"Yes."

Now that it is all over I am amused. They were rather clever after all. First they knew that Charles had been carried into the park because there had been no dirt on his shoes. But the most damaging thing, indeed, the fatal thing, was the words that I had impressed upon Charles' forearm with my carbon copy page when trying to stifle his bleeding arm. There were only a few words there and barely legible, but it was enough. What I am amused about is that the incriminating words were from a passage I had written declaring the pristine responsibility of the physician to humanity because of the sacredness and the importance of every life.

I was adjudged criminally insane, but I think they misunderstood and exaggerated the whole business.

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OF THE FIVE WHO CAME . . .

A NOVELETTE

by Fletcher Flora

I THINK NOW, looking back, that I had a feeling of trouble from the moment they came, but I had no feeling at first that the trouble was death.

They came early in the afternoon of a day in May. There were five of them. Two pairs and a single. They came in a 1958 Chrysler station wagon with flaring fins and a Kansas City license and a luggage rack on top. Behind the wagon, on a trailer, was an inboard motor boat, sleek and polished and with a look of power. The wagon stopped in the drive behind my cottage. I went outside and started toward it, and a man got out from under the wheel and started toward the cottage, and we met between starting places.

He was a tall man with a hard, square face and heavy shoulders and big hands with long spatulate fingers. The nails of the fingers were manicured, and the hands looked fleshy and soft; actually they were very strong, and they felt, I noticed when we shook hands, like expensive and pliant cowhide.

He looked familiar. I had a notion he was someone I should remember from another time and place. His name was, I thought, Ira Boniface, for that was the name of the man who had reserved three cottages, and I had never seen him or heard of him before to my knowledge. He was wearing a soft cloth hat with little air vents in each side above the band, and a light leather jacket over a red and brown plaid shirt. His trousers were brown, some kind of tough twill, and his shoes were darker brown and pebble-grained with mocassin toes and thick soles.

"Welcome to Laird's Point," I said. "I'm John Laird."

"Thanks," he said. "I'm Dan Grimes."

He said it as if he expected to be recognized, and he usually was.

He would have been recognized, by name if not by sight, by almost anyone in the state, and by many people outside it. The boss of the dominant political party, he had never run for office or been appointed to one, but he was the man who controlled the men who did, and he exercised an incredible power and authority that had been developed through violence and a kind of magical persuasiveness and managed to survive by a complex system of alliances and loyalties and threats that no one could quite analyze or understand.

"I was expecting a Mr. Boniface," I said.

"Ira's in the wagon," he said.

He turned half around toward the wagon from the hips, and this was apparently a sign for the others to move, for they got out of the wagon and came toward us, two women and two men. One of the men was as tall as Grimes, but not so heavy in the shoulders nor quite so broad in the hips, and he moved like a big cat. The other man was short and slight by comparison, though not much shorter or slighter than I, and there was about him an odd and incongruous effect of force and frailty that made you instantly aware of him. Both of the women were attractive, each in her own way. One of them was a brunette with a clear brown skin, and the other was a blonde with a clear brown skin.

Grimes began without preface to introduce the four, and it turned out that the big cat-like man was Ira Boniface, the one who had made the reservations, and the brunette was his wife and was called Rita. She had the kind of looks that hit you at once and hit you hard. She was wearing a red cashmere sweater tucked into the waistband of a pair of fancy black pants that fit her a little looser than her clear brown skin.

The other couple, the slight man and the blonde woman, were Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Quintin. Her Christian name was Laura. Her head was bare in the bright sun, her hair so pale that it seemed in the light to be almost white. It was sleeked back without a part and held in a knot on her neck, and it seemed naturally the pale color that it was. She was very slender, almost thin, and she had the special and rather gaunt seductiveness of a high fashion model. She nodded to me without speaking or smiling, and afterward she looked immediately away, down the slope behind me to the blue lake glittering in the sun. In her face, I thought, there was a kind of petulance that was not actually an expression but only the suggestion or shadow of one.

After the introductions, I pointed out the three cottages that had been reserved for them. They stood in a line along the lake shore about twenty feet apart and about fifty feet up the slope from the water,

and they were the best three of the four that I had to rent. The fourth cottage was considered not so good because it was farther up the slope with the others between it and the lake, and it was not at this time either reserved or rented.

Grimes moved off toward the cottages, the other following, and I unloaded the luggage and tackle boxes from the rack on top of the Chrysler and separated it according to the identification tags. While I was doing this, I kept watching to see how the cottages were claimed. Ira and Rita Boniface went into the first, Grimes into the second, and the Quintins into the third, the last on the far end of the line near the point.

I gathered up the Quintins' luggage, a leather bag and a metal tackle box and a long aluminum rod case, and carried it down past the first cottage and the second cottage to the third cottage on the end. I kicked against the screen door lightly, and someone said to come in, and I pushed the door open with a shoulder and went inside and set the luggage down on the concrete floor of the screened-in porch. Laura Quintin was sitting in a chair on the porch, staring out through the screen and down through the scrub oaks on the slope to the lake. Jerome Quintin came to the door and stood leaning against the jamb.

"Thanks," he said, looking at the luggage.

"I think this is all of it," I said.

"Bag, tackle box, rods," he said. "That's it."

There was a feeling of suspension on the porch, an uneasy hiatus between something before and something that would come after, and I had arrived, I felt, between two parts of a conversation that had been bad and might become worse.

"If there's anything you need, let me know," I said.

"We'll do that," Quintin said.

He shoved a hand into a pocket and looked uncertain, but apparently he decided that a tip would not be appropriate in my case, and after a moment he pulled the hand out of the pocket and put it behind him.

"Do you own this place?" Laura Quintin asked suddenly.

She did not look at me and did not sound as if she really cared if I owned the place or not. Her voice was quiet and curiously flat.

"The bank and I," I said.

"Do you live here by yourself?"

"Yes. Except for the guests."

"I wonder why."

"It's a pretty good way to live," I said. "A man's life is pretty much his own."

"I like a man who lives his own life," she said.

She wasn't really speaking to me. She was speaking to Jerome Quintin, her husband. Glancing at him, I saw that his face had suddenly set in stiff lines, his mouth pinched and white at the corners.

"I hope you enjoy your stay," I said.

Neither of them answered, and I opened the screen door and went out and back up to the Chrysler and got another load of luggage and carried it to the middle cottage where Dan Grimes had gone. He heard me at the door and came out and held it open for me.

"Thanks," I said.

"I should have carried it over myself," he said.

"It's all right," I said. "It's part of the service."

He had taken off his hat and leather jacket and looked relaxed and happy in his plaid shirt.

"There's a bottle of Scotch in the bag," he said. "Have a drink with me?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I've got some work to do."

"There must be a lot of work to running a place like this. Do you do it all yourself?"

"Most of it."

"How are the fish biting now?"

"Fine. Lots of crappie and bass. The wall-eye are coming on."

"That's what I heard. A friend of mine was down here last week. He recommended your place."

"Thank him for me when you see him."

"I'll try my luck after awhile. Toward evening."

"Evening's a good time," I said.

He sounded natural and friendly, and I found myself liking him. I guess that's why he'd been able to do all the things he'd done, because he had a natural and friendly way and a lot of people besides me had found themselves liking him until it was too late to know better. I said so-long and went back for the last of the luggage and took it to the first cottage. On the way, I saw Ira Boniface standing at the edge of the lake at the foot of the slope with his back to the cottage. I pushed the screen door open and put the luggage on the floor of the porch. Rita Boniface asked from inside who it was, and I answered that it was John Laird with the luggage.

"Would you mind bringing it inside?" she said.

"Not at all," I said.

I picked it up again and carried it into the sitting-sleeping room and set it on the floor by a studio couch. Rita Boniface was lying on her back on the double bed smoking a cigarette. She turned her head toward me and smiled lazily and breathed a thin cloud of smoke.

"What's to do around here besides fishing?" she said.

"Not much," I said. "It's a fishing camp."

"You look like a clever young man," she said. "Maybe you can think of something."

"I'll try to make your stay as pleasant as possible," I said.

She breathed smoke in and out of her lungs and laughed softly. The laugh had the effect of riding out on the smoke. Down below on

the lake, a small cabin cruiser turned out of the main channel and around the point into the arm in front of the cottages. It pulled in slowly beside my gasoline dock, and its horn sounded twice.

"Excuse me," I said. "Someone needs gas."

"Come again when you can stay longer," she said.

I went down the slope to the gasoline dock and filled the tank of the small cruiser and talked for awhile with the pilot and then stood on the dock and watched the cruiser turn in the narrow arm and move back out into the channel. In spite of the sun and the quiet lake, I had a feeling that it was a bad day.

Later in the afternoon Dan Grimes came over to my cottage. He was carrying a spinning rod and reel in one hand a green metal tackle box in the other.

"You going out?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Can you suggest a good place?"

"It depends on what you're after."

"Bass."

"You'd better go up to the Gravois Arm. You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"You want me to help you launch your boat?"

"No, thanks. Ira can help. Where's the best place to launch it?"

"Just follow the road past the cottages. It runs right down to the water near the point. You'd better back down all the way. There's go good place to turn."

"All right. I'll need enough gas to get around to the pump."

"I've got some here in a can," I said.

I gave him the can, and he went out and turned the Chrysler in the drive and started slowly backward down the road with the trailer in advance. As he passed the first cottage, Ira Boniface came out with his rod and tackle and got into the Chrysler while it continued to move. I went down to the gasoline pump and waited, and pretty soon they came around the point in the boat. The motor of the boat sounded sweet and strong. It was not a big boat, but it was the best you could buy of its kind and had cost quite a lot of money. I filled the tank and watched the boat move out into the channel and then went back up to the cottages to check the wood boxes.

The days that May were mostly clear and warm, but the evenings and nights generally got pretty cool, and sometimes it was pleasant to have a small fire in the fireplace. So I checked the wood boxes, and there was enough wood in all of them for that night. When I reached the last one and looked into it Laura Quintan came out onto the screened porch and spoke.

"May we please have some ice?" she said.

"There ought to be a couple of trays in the refrigerator," I said.

"There isn't any. Someone left the trays on the cabinet."

"Sorry. I'll get some and bring it right down."

"Thank you."

I went back to my own cottage and put a couple dozen cubes in a plastic bag and returned. Approaching the Quintins' cottage, I heard Laura Quintin's voice raised in anger, but in spite of volume and anger it retained, or acquired a cold quality of deadly calm. It was somehow in accord with her pale reserve. She was the kind of woman. I thought, who would never in anger become excessively emotional and vulgar. She would become, as she was now, bitterly cold and incisive.

"The trouble with you," she said, "is that you have an unfortunate combination of qualities. You are brilliant and charming and weak. Because you have no guts, you're a perfect tool."

"Thanks for your opinion," Jerome Quintin said. "I'm happy to know precisely what you think of me."

"Not at all. I'm delighted to tell you."

"Would you care to learn, in return, what I think of you?"

"I don't think I particularly care any longer."

"Nevertheless, I want to tell you. Just for my own satisfaction. You have, my dear, no scope, no imagination, and not, I suspect, much intelligence. Because you want to be a nonentity, you want to make me one also."

"You see? You have proved your weakness beautifully with your own words. Is being a nonentity the only alternative to what you're becoming? For heaven's sake, can't you exploit your own talents in your own way for your own good?"

I had stopped outside the screen door, and I was suddenly aware that I was deliberately listening. I was a little ashamed, but not much. In the interval of silence that now fell, I knocked quickly and was told by Jerome Quintin to come in. I opened the door and crossed the porch and went into the cottage and put the bag of cubes on a table.

"I hope these will hold you until your own have time to freeze," I said.

"That's more than enough," Quintin said. "Thanks very much."

Two bottles were sitting on the cabinet by the sink in the kitchen area. He took three glasses from a shelf above and put ice cubes in the glasses.

"You'll have a drink with us, of course," he said.

"No, thanks," I said. "I'd better get back."

"Nonsense. Surely you can take time for a drink. We'd be pleased

to have you join us, wouldn't we, Laura?"

"Yes, of course," Laura Quintin said. "Please do."

She said it promptly and nicely, but it obviously made no difference to her, one way or the other. The quality of anger was no longer in her voice, but it was cold and rigidly contained.

"All right," I said. "I'll have one with you."

"Good. Bourbon or Scotch?"

"Bourbon."

"Straight?"

"A little tap water, please," I answered.

He poured bourbon over ice in one of the glasses and added water. He repeated the operation with the other glasses, using Scotch instead of bourbon. Afterward he distributed the drinks, and Laura took hers first and swallowed some of it instantly without ceremony. I lifted my own in a small salute to Quintin for his hospitality. It was a strong drink of good whiskey.

"I think," Laura said, "that I'll drink a great many of these tonight. It seems to me like a good night to drink lots and lots of Scotch."

She drained her glass quickly, as if it were so much water, and got up immediately and began mixing another drink. Jerome Quintin laughed and shrugged it off lightly. I had a feeling that he was furious, but it was only a feeling without any evidence of expression in his face or voice.

"Laura doesn't particularly care for fishing trips," he said.

"He's wrong," Laura said. "It is only this particular fishing trip that I don't care for."

"Laura's feeling sorry for herself at the moment," Quintin said. "You must excuse her."

"He's wrong again," she said. "It's him I'm feeling sorry for."

They were talking *through* me again, as they had before, and I didn't like it. I took another swallow of my drink and thought I'd finish it quickly and get out of there.

"Will you tell me something, Mr. Laird?" Quintin said.

"If I can," I said.

"Do you expect to become governor of this state?"

"No."

"If you did become governor of this state, would you consider it an accomplishment of some merit?"

"Yes."

"Well, it so happens that I do expect to become governor of this state, Mr. Laird. In a short while, as you'll see, I shall become attorney-general and in due time after that I shall become governor."

"Congratulations."

He had finished his drink and was fixing another. Watching the pair of them, Jérome and Laura Quintin in their queer cold conflict, I became aware of something that I'd missed before. They'd been

working on the Scotch warm, before the ice came. They were both already a little drunk, quietly and bitterly.

"Thank you, Mr. Laird," he said. "It may interest you to know, however, that Laura does not share your feeling about the significance of being governor. Would you believe it? She seems to feel that it would somehow be degrading to be governor."

"He'll never be governor," Laura said.

"Of course I'll be governor. It's all set, Mr. Laird. Long range planning, you know."

"No. He'll never be attorney-general, and he'll never be governor. Dan Grimes will be attorney-general, and Dan Grimes will be governor. Jerome Quintin will be nothing."

"She's talking too much," Quintin said. "You'll please pardon her, Mr. Laird."

She drank from her glass and looked at me levelly over the rim.

"Yes," she said, "you'll please pardon me, Mr. Laird. I've been attending a wake for a long time, and I'm a little drunk on Scotch and grief. I'm in mourning for a man I knew once and loved. A young lawyer I helped put through law school. He was brilliant, and I thought he had integrity, and I admired him in addition to loving him, but he died. He died of corruption, and he's dead, and he'll be buried in the state capitol."

Quintin stood looking into his glass until she'd finished. Then, without looking at her or me, he simply walked out of the room onto the porch and stood looking out through the screen and the gathering shadows beneath the trees to the darkening surface of the lake.

"I'd better go," I said. "Thanks very much for the drink."

"You're quite welcome," Laura Quintin said.

I set my glass carefully on the table and went out behind Quintin. He didn't turn or speak as I opened the screen door quietly and left.

As I crossed in front of the Boniface cottage, Rita Boniface spoke to me from the shadows. I stopped and looked up and saw her dimly on the other side of the screen.

"Come in and have a drink with me," she said.

"I just had a drink," I said.

"Come in and have another."

"If you don't mind, I wont."

"I do mind, however. If you just had a drink, you must have had it with my dreary friends, the Quintins. I demand equal consideration."

"As a paying guest," I said, "I guess you're entitled to it."

I went up onto the porch. She was standing there in the shadows, but when I entered she turned and went inside, and I followed.

"You don't sound as if you like the Quintins much," I said.

"You're wrong," she said. "I

don't like them any. Not one bit."

"To me," I said, "they seem like a reasonably nice couple having a little reasonably normal trouble."

"Do you think so?" she said. "How tolerant of you. Never mind, though. The bottle's on the cabinet."

Beside the bottle was the glass she'd been using. Two small pieces of ice were floating in the bottom in about a quarter of an inch of water. I emptied the glass in the sink and I rinsed it and made a fresh drink in it. I mixed another for myself in another glass, and then she came over to me, moving out of the light of a small lamp into the fringe shadows of the kitchen area. Taking her glass and drinking from it, she made a face and immediately poured some of the liquid into the sink. She filled the glass again from the bottle.

"You make a very poor drink, Mr. Laird," she said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Will you have a little more whiskey in yours?"

"No, thanks. This suits me."

"Really? I can't understand how anyone can tolerate a weak drink. A good strong drink is what I like."

"I see it is."

"You needn't look concerned, however. It's perfectly all right. I have a remarkable capacity for alcohol."

"I'm glad to know it."

"It's a kind of gift or something. Some people have capacity for it, and some people don't, and you'd be surprised who some of the people are who don't. Do you realize that it's practically impossible to judge a person's capacity from his appearance?"

"I've never thought about it."

"It is, I assure you. Take Dan Grimes, for instance. You wouldn't think a man so big and strong and important as Dan would have practically no capacity at all for alcohol, but it's true. That's why he never drinks except when he's with friends where it won't make any difference. He always gets drunk almost immediately, and the next thing you know he's getting sick and passing out. What I mean is, he's susceptible. Are you susceptible, Mr. Laird?"

"I don't drink much."

"How unfortunate. It might make you more entertaining if you did. Are you susceptible to anything else in particular?"

She was standing very close to me, and I could smell the astringent sweetness of her perfume, and feel on my face as she talked the moist warmth of her breath. All at once she put an arm around my neck and put her lips on mine, kissing me slowly. There was a suggestion of a taunt in the way she took her time. I stood quietly with the glass in my right hand, the left hand empty behind her back and carefully not touching her, and after awhile she stepped back past the empty hand and

leaned against the cabinet and began to laugh softly as if she were genuinely amused.

"You are also a very poor kisser, Mr. Laird," she said. "You make a poor drink, and you kiss a poor kiss."

"I guess I just have no talent," I said.

"It's possible. On the other hand, it's possible that you're merely undeveloped. You might improve with experience."

"I'll think about it," I said.

From the lake came the strong, sweet sound of a motor boat moving pretty fast. The sound moved from the main channel past the point and into the arm.

"It's Ira and Dan," Rita Boniface said.

"Sounds like it," I said.

I finished my drink and set the glass on the table. Turning toward the door, I saw clearly in the light of the lamp something I had not seen before. It was a shoulder harness, complete with .38 automatic, and it was lying in a casual way across the foot of the bed like nothing more than a discarded shirt. I stopped and stared at it, feeling a cold and heavy congealing of the uneasiness that had been gathering inside me ever since the arrival of these odd people that I did not understand and did not like. I wished that they had not come, or that they would, having come, go away again at once.

"What a pretty toy," I said.

"The gun? It's Ira's."

"Is it part of his ordinary equipment?"

"It is when he goes anywhere with Dan Grimes, and he's going somewhere with Dan practically all the time."

"You mean he's Grimes' bodyguard?"

"That's one of the things he is. Ira's a number of things that might surprise you. He's a capable guy."

"I got that impression."

"He's a very capable guy, and he's mine. Don't be fooled because I try to entertain myself when I'm bored. Ira's number one."

"With you and Grimes both?"

"That's right. With me and Dan and others too. As I said, where Dan goes, Ira usually goes." She paused, and I could hear her breathing, the sound of it suddenly slow and deep and measured in the room. "Maybe soon," she said softly, as if I were no longer there and she were speaking only to herself, "Dan will go somewhere without Ira, and there will only be Ira left."

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," she said. "I was just thinking."

The boat had pulled up to the dock, and I went outside and walked a few steps down the slope and waited. Dan Grimes and Ira Boniface came up the slope toward me. Grimes was walking a little in advance, and he was carrying a metal stringer with half a dozen bass hanging from it. He held the

string up for me to see, and it was plain that he was feeling exhilarated by his luck.

"What do you think of these?" he said.

"They're beauties," I said.

They looked as if they'd weigh about three to five pounds each. There were two white bass and four black bass.

"You knew what you were talking about, all right," he said. "The second cast I made, I got a good strike."

"Did they give you a good fight?"

"Yes," he said, "they fought hard."

Rita Boniface had come after me out of the cottage. She lit a cigarette and stood looking at the bass without enthusiasm.

"I'm getting hungry," she said.

"We'll go get something to eat," Grimes said. He turned back to me. "Where's a good place to go, Laird? From now on, I'm taking your advice on everything."

"There's a place just where you turned off the highway onto the lake road," I said. "They have good Kansas City steaks. Charcoal broiled."

"Fine," Grimes said. "How's a KC charcoal broiled steak sound, Rita?"

"It sounds good," Rita said. "Let's go get it."

She turned and started up the slope to the cottage, and Ira Boniface went after her.

"I'll clean your bass and put them in the freezer," I said.

"Will you do that?" Grimes handed me the string. "I'd appreciate it."

"It's nothing," I said. "Part of the service."

"Next time anyone wants to know a good place to fish, I'll know where to tell him."

"That's what I like to hear," I said.

He went up the slope at an angle to his own cottage. There was a big stump of an oak on the slope between the cottage he was in and the one occupied by the Quintins. I used the stump for cleaning fish for guests, and now I got a knife and a scaler and cleaned the bass on the stump. I had just finished with the last bass when Grimes and the others came out of the cottages and drove away in the Chrysler wagon. It was almost as dark then as it would get, and there was a bright moon rising out of the lake.

They came back about ten and went into Grimes cottage. A little later I went down the slope to the dock and sat on the bench in the moonlight. It was a wonderfully clear, cool night, the air filled with scents and stirring with small sounds, and I sat there for a long time on the bench, but I was unable to feel any of the good things a man should feel on that kind of night.

Someone in the cottage turned on a portable radio and tuned in a d. j. program. The music was very bad and very loud, and the talk and laughter became louder in competition with the bad music. They were having quite a party up there. I was glad the fourth cottage was unoccupied, because otherwise I might have had a complaint about the noise, which would have created a problem.

I kept sitting on the bench on the dock until it got to be midnight, and then I got up and walked along the edge of the lake to the point. I stood on the point for quite a long time. I could hear now and then, out in the water, the splash of a leaping fish, and in the trees across the arm along a ridge, a loon and an owl. After awhile I turned and started up the slope at an angle toward the cottages. In the middle cottage the party was still going on, but the laughter and talk had become sporadic and not so loud as before, and it was apparent that things were coming slowly to an end. Among the trees on the slope, it was very dark. In the Quintins' cottage, the first I reached, I could hear faintly a harsh, aspirate sound of deep breathing. I was not more than two feet from the porch, and I stopped and looked inside, but it was too dark to see anything, and I stood there for a minute listening to the breathing, which was suddenly quieter and hardly audible. I took a step backward to turn and leave, and my foot came down on a dead branch. The branch cracked sharply, and someone spoke instantly beyond the dark doorway. It was the voice of Laura Quintin.

"Who's there?" she said.

"It's John Laird," I said.

"Oh. I'm glad you've come along, Mr. Laird. I could use some help." Her voice sounded tired and curiously flat.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Will you come in, please?"

I went up across the porch and into the cottage. Dimly in the darkness, I could see Laura Quintin standing beside an easy chair near the bed. In the chair was the slumped figure of a man who was, from his size, either Dan Grimes or Ira Boniface.

"It's Dan Grimes," she said. "He's passed out."

"What's he doing in your cottage?"

"He got sick at the party and went outside. Afterward he came in here and passed out in the chair. I just found him a few minutes ago." Her curiously flat voice had suddenly a thin edge of disgust. "He always gets drunk and sick when he tries to drink."

I had been aware of something unpleasant in the air of the room, and I recognized it now for the faint and sour stench of vomit. Grimes, in his sickness, had soiled his shirt.

"Do you want me to get him

back to his own cottage?" I said.

"No. Just help me put him on the bed. He can spend the night here."

"What about you?"

"Jerry and I can take his cottage."

"You needn't help move him. I can do it alone."

"No. You're kind enough to help at all. Just take his feet, please."

"He's a heavy man. You'd better let me do it alone."

"I'm quite capable, thank you. I'm really much stronger than I look."

As if to settle the matter without any more delay, she leaned over the chair and slipped her hands under Grimes' slack arms at the shoulders.

"You've got the heavy end," I said. "Come take the feet."

"I'm quite all right."

So I took his feet, and we carried him between us to the bed and put him on it. She must have been, as she claimed, much stronger than she looked, for he was very heavy, dead weight, and she carried him well. We left him on the bed and went out onto the porch. I offered her a cigarette, which she took. In the light of the match that I struck for her, her face looked pale and slightly drawn, set in lines of fastidious distaste.

"Thank you for helping me," she said.

"You're welcome," I said. "I only wonder why you bothered with him."

"He was drunk. I put him on the bed, that's all."

"Your bed. In your cottage. It will be an inconvenience, at least."

"No inconvenience is too great to suffer for Dan Grimes. Haven't you heard? People will do anything to gain his favor. If you don't believe me, ask Jerry."

"You don't approve of Grimes?"

"He's an unclean animal," she said, "who corrupts everyone he touches."

She spoke quietly with no inflection of anger. It was as if anger had burned itself out in its own excesses, leaving only a kind of sodden acceptance and bitterness. I said good-night and turned to leave, and she spoke again.

"Please don't go," she said.

I stopped and turned back. She lifted a hand, touched me on the arm, dropped the hand again to her side. The gesture was a kind of appeal.

"It's late," I said. "It's almost one o'clock."

"I couldn't possibly sleep," she said. "I feel as if I'll never sleep again. I'd be grateful if you'd stay with me. I don't think I could bear being alone."

"Your husband will be looking for you."

"No. He's been drinking heavily. He'll go to sleep just as soon as the others leave. I'll go tell him to stay in Dan's cottage for the rest of the night. Will you wait for me?"

"I'll wait."

We went outside together, off the porch, and I waited in the darkness under the trees while she went alone into the middle cabin. The radio was not playing. I could hear no more laughing, no talking. The party, I thought, was over. In about three minutes Laura Quintin returned.

"All right?" I said.

"All right."

"Shall we go down to the dock?"

"No. I think I'd like some coffee. Is there someplace we can go?"

"The places on the highway are closed by this time. There's an all-night restaurant in the nearest town."

"Will you take me there?"

"If your husband doesn't mind."

"He doesn't. The truth is, I told him you were taking me for coffee and not to expect me back for awhile. He'll go to sleep on Dan's bed when Ira and Rita leave."

"In that case," I said, "let's go."

We walked past the Boniface cottage to my own, and I put her in the front seat of my Ford and went around and got in beside her, and we drove down the lake road to the highway and south on the highway about fifteen miles to the nearest town, which made a total distance, lake road and highway together, of about eighteen miles. She sat all the way on the far side of the seat by the door, her body slumped and her pale head against the back of the seat and her eyes staring at the roof of the car above the windshield as if she could see through it to the stars in the sky beyond. Now and then I turned my head and looked at her, and I began slowly to see and feel the beauty of her, not lush and belting beauty like that of Rita Boniface, but a stark, high-fashion beauty that a man, once he was aware of it, might never forget. She didn't speak once in the eighteen miles.

In the all-night restaurant, which wasn't much of a restaurant in a town that wasn't much of a town, we sat across from each other in a booth and had good coffee, and finally she began to talk, or it seemed she did, but afterward I realized that she mostly listened to the talking of John Laird. I told her how I happened to be running a fishing resort, and why I liked what I did and didn't particularly want to do anything else, none of which was important to anyone but me, and it wasn't long before early dawn when we left the restaurant and started back for the lake. She was more relaxed then, and I thought there was more color in her hollow cheeks beneath high bones. She sat close to me in the seat and rested her head on my shoulder, and I liked the feel of it there, the nearness of her pale hair. On the lake road, just before we reached the cottages, she sat up and kissed me lightly and said, "Thanks for humoring me, John Laird," and I said, "It's part of the service," and then, in a minute, we were pulling

into the area beside my cottage, and Ira Boniface was standing there waiting for us in the first faint light of the day.

That was the little bit of good in all of it, the short time with Laura Quintin, and it was the end of the good when we saw Boniface. I knew it even before we got out of the Ford, before Boniface spoke.

"Where the devil have you been?" he said.

"To town for coffee," I said.

"You were gone long enough," he said.

"We took our time," I said.

"Never mind that now," he said. "Laura, you'd better go to your cottage. The one Dan had."

"I know which one," she said.

She looked at him for a moment after speaking, as if trying to decide whether to go or not, and then she shrugged and walked across the slope to the cottage and went in.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Did you see Dan Grimes last night after we got back from eating?"

"Yes. He was drunk. Passed out in the Quintins' cottage."

"Tell me about it."

"There's nothing much to tell. He'd been sick. He went into the cottage and passed out in a chair. Laura Quintin found him there, and I helped her lay him on the bed."

"How'd you happen to be around?"

"I'd been down to the point. On the way back I passed the cottage, and she heard me. She called me in to help."

"All right." He took a deep breath and held it and then released it slowly. "Dan's dead."

"Dead? You mean he died after we left him?"

"He was killed. Someone murdered him."

I had felt in my bones that things were going bad, but not this bad, and I stood there for a long minute staring at him and trying to make some kind of sense of what he'd said, and then, when I had, the first thing I thought afterward was what a hell of a bad break it was for my little camp that I'd worked so hard to build into a good place for good people to come fishing.

"How?" I said.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you."

He spun around abruptly and started across the face of the slope with long strides, and I went after him. A small table lamp was burning beside the bed in the last cottage. Boniface had left it burning, I suppose, after his earlier visit. We went inside and stood beside the bed in the area of light and looked down at the body of Dan Grimes. He was wearing, I thought at first, some kind of long, barbaric earring. Then I saw that it was not an earring at all. It was a metal stringer. The stringer was made of about a dozen large pins, much like safety pins, attached to a chain.

Someone had unsnapped one of the pins and straightened it and driven it into Dan Grimes' brain through the auditory canal of his right ear. It was the stringer, I somehow knew at once, that I had left on the oak stump between this cottage and the next after I'd finished cleaning six bass the night before.

"We'd planned to go out on the lake early this morning," Ira Boniface said. "I came over to see if he still wanted to go, after last night, and this is the way I found him."

His voice was even and hard. If he was feeling any emotion at all, any anger or grief or regret or guilt, it was not discernible. I turned and brushed past him and went out onto the porch, and it was becoming then the clear bright morning of a bad day.

"I'll go phone the sheriff," I said.

The sheriff came about forty minutes after I got him out of bed. He was a very fat man. His name was Sam Austin.

"This is big, Johnny," he said.

He drew a long breath and blew it out slowly, pursing his cupid's mouth. His round blue eyes stared at me reproachfully, as if it were all somehow my fault.

"I guess I better go have a look," he said.

"He's in the last cottage," I said.

"You stick around close, Johnny. I'll want to talk to you later."

"I'll be here," I said.

He sighed again and went lumbering across the slope toward the cottage in which Dan Grimes lay dead. I could see Ira Boniface standing on the screened-in porch. He had guarded Grimes in life, and he guarded him still in death. Jerome and Laura Quintin came out of the middle cottage and stood together inside the screen. Rita Boniface walked across from the first cottage to join the Quintins. I turned and went over to the porch steps of my own cottage and sat down. I sat there for about half an hour, maybe longer, and then Sam Austin and Ira Boniface came out of the last cottage and walked over to the middle cottage, and I kept on sitting where I was. I tried to concentrate on the lake and the cool coves still deep in the shade of shoreline timber, but it was all ruined and no good at all, and what I kept thinking about was everything that had happened since the Chrysler wagon had pulled in yesterday from Kansas City. I had a feeling that something significant had happened between then and now, something said or done that had hung for a moment to the edge of consciousness and then had slipped away. Whatever it was, I felt, would now assume in the aftermath of murder a kind of definitive and terrible meaning that had not then registered.

I didn't really want to remember it, to tell the truth, but I couldn't

help trying in spite of myself, and I went over in detail everything I had seen, but it didn't help, and then I went over in detail everything I had heard, but that didn't help either. I got up from the porch steps and went down the slope to the dock. The water of the lake was still as glass and dark, dark green.

It must have been an hour later when Sam Austin came down to the dock. I could hear him descending the slope behind me, and the dock, floating on steel drums, fell and rose and fell again under the shifting of his weight as he came across it. He didn't sit down on the bench beside me. He stood at the edge of the dock and looked across the lake as if he were wishing desperately that he were on the other side. At his feet, nosing the dock in company, side by side, were the motorboat in which he'd come and the sleek inboard that had belonged to Dan Grimes.

"Big, Johnny," he said. "This is big. And I don't like any part of it."

"Neither do I."

"Sure. I can see that. It won't do your place any good when the news gets out. These are important people, Johnny."

"I got that impression."

"Powerful people, Johnny. You heard of this Ira Boniface?"

"I understand he was Dan Grimes' right arm. Something like that."

"More than that. He'd always had his own connections, his own followers. I've heard it said that he planned to get rid of Grimes and take over the organization himself in his own good time. Now's the time, I guess. With Grimes gone, he'll take over."

"You think he may have arranged the time?"

Sam looked over his shoulder, and a shudder seemed to pass through the flesh of his enormous body.

"For God's sake, keep your voice down, Johnny," he said. "You know how voices carry here."

"Sorry."

"I can't afford any mistakes, Johnny. About what you said. About Boniface arranging the time. You think so?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The way it was done. Stabbed through the ear that way. I don't think Boniface would kill anyone like that. It's out of character."

"Maybe deliberately out of character." Sam looked at me with a glint of shrewdness in his eyes that reminded me that he was no fool, however frightened he might be. "Maybe just an opportunity that he snatched to make it look like someone else."

"Maybe. I don't think so."

"I understand you left that stringer on the stump outside the cottage after cleaning some bass last night. That right?"

"That's right."

"Anyone could have picked it up."

"Anyone."

"But only one did."

"Only one."

"The blonde woman said you helped her put Dan Grimes on the bed where he was killed. She said he'd passed out."

"Laura Quintin. Yes, I helped her."

"Afterward, she said, you and she went to town and didn't get back until nearly daylight. After Boniface had found the body."

"That's true. Boniface met us."

"Boniface says he and his wife, that blackheaded looker, went to their own cottage right after you and Mrs. Quintin left for town. He says the whiskey they'd drunk had left them drawn tight and wide awake, and they couldn't sleep. He says they lay in bed and smoked and talked until it was almost time for him to get up and meet Grimes for the fishing they'd planned. He says his wife went to sleep maybe half an hour before the time, but he didn't sleep at all. I'm not the coroner, Johnny, but I'll bet my best spinner, after looking at the body, that Grimes died more than half an hour before he was found."

"I see. You mean the Bonifaces alibi each other. And Mrs. Quintin and I do the same."

"They could be lying, of course."

"The Bonifaces?"

"Yes."

"So could Laura Quintin and I."

"Not likely, Johnny. If it was her husband instead of you, I might consider it."

"The way it looks to me, you've got Jerome Quintin left."

"That's the way it looks. He says he fell on the bed in the cottage Dan Grimes had taken, the one the party was in, and he didn't wake up until his wife came in this morning. Just his own word."

"It doesn't make sense that Jerome Quintin killed Grimes."

"No? Why not?"

"Grimes had ambitious plans for Quintin. He intended to put him in the capitol."

"Governor?"

"Eventually."

"Who told you?"

"Quintin himself. His wife corroborated it."

"It didn't have to be true, just because he said it."

"It didn't have to be, but I think it was."

"Maybe something developed that we don't know about. Maybe Grimes changed his plans. Maybe he told Quintin he was going to dump him."

"I doubt it, but maybe so. If so, how would it have helped matters to kill Grimes. Quintin would still have been in the dump."

"Not if he had an agreement with Boniface."

"I see what you mean. Quintin kills Grimes. Boniface becomes the

power. Boniface assumes the support of Quintin."

"Something like that. You think it sounds reasonable?"

"No."

"I didn't think you would. Neither do I, as a matter of fact. The thing's too clumsy. If it had been planned that way, Quintin would have to have been left in the clear."

"That's right. A man who's been a murder suspect is no candidate for office."

"You got any other ideas?"

I looked across the lake into the cool, deep pocket of a cove. "No," I said.

He sighed and slapped a fat thigh. Turning fully around, he stared up the slope toward the cottages.

"I'm afraid to move, Johnny. That's the truth."

"You better call in the state cops."

"That's what I've been thinking."

"There's a phone in my cottage."

"Thanks. I'll use it. I've got to get the coroner out here too."

He lumbered off the dock and up the slope. I sat on the bench and listened to him go. He breathed so heavily on the ascent that I could hear him almost the entire way to the top. And then, in a kind of flash of insight, I remembered what it was that had hung last night for a moment to the edge of consciousness, and it was nothing I had seen, and nothing I had heard, but something, instead, that I hadn't heard and should have.

The bad that had come in the Chrysler would get no worse. It was now as bad as it could get.

The sun rose higher in the east, and shadows shortened under shoreline trees. I sat in the sun on the dock and waited for the murderer to come, and after awhile she did. It seemed like a long, long while, but it wasn't. It was, from the time Sam Austin went up the slope, no more than five minutes. She sat down beside me on the bench with a soft sigh.

"You should despise us," she said. "We're corrupt people."

"Maybe I should," I said, "but I don't. Especially not you."

"You should despise me most of all."

"No. I confess that I admire you very much."

"Why?"

"Because you're beautiful. Because you were a fine companion for a little while. Because you're the coldest, cleverest woman in an emergency that I've ever known. I admire you, and I'm afraid of you."

She didn't look at me. As I remember it, she never looked at me once while she sat there. All I remember is the stark, high-fashion beauty of her cold profile as she stared steadily across the glittering water.

"Why do you say that?"

"I say it because it's so. Last night

when I came up from the point and heard you in the cottage, you made a bad mistake. When I made a noise, you were startled and spoke immediately without thinking. It was a mistake most women would have been unable to surmount. Not you. You did the only possible thing that could give you a chance to escape the consequences, and it almost worked. Instead of sending me away, which would have put you in the worst possible position after the body was found, you called me inside. You had me help you put the body on the bed, taking the head and shoulders yourself to prevent my discovering the stringer, and to prevent its making a noise in the movement. Who would dream that a murderer would ask for help to move the body of his victim? There was simply no reason why it should have occurred to me that Dan Grimes was dead, and it didn't. I accepted naturally the reasonable explanation—that he was drunk. It must require a special kind of woman to drive a piece of pointed steel into a man's brain and then, afterward, nearly caught in the act, to carry out calmly such a dangerous deception. Not only did you have a witness to the fact that Grimes was alive when you left him, but also, by keeping me with you the rest of the night, a witness to the fact that you could not have killed him later. I feel rather bad about that. I hoped that it was only my company you wanted, but I see that it wasn't. Never mind. Providing an alibi, I guess, should be considered part of the service, too."

She lifted her head, tilting her face to the sky, as if, by doing so, she could expose herself to more of the clean bright light of the new day.

"You said you had no reason to think that he was not alive. Why do you think so now?"

"Something that almost registered at the time, but didn't quite. A little while ago, as I listened to Sam Austin climb the slope, it did. There were three of us in that dark cottage, *but only two of us were breathing.* A man in a drunken sleep breathes heavily, but during all the time we were in the room together, the three of us, I never hard Dan Grimes breathe at all."

She shrugged her thin shoulders, still looking at the sky, seeming to dismiss the indictment with indifference.

"It's really very flimsy, you know. After several hours, you remember that you didn't hear a man breathe. I doubt that it would be given much credence against my word."

"I doubt it too. If it isn't, your husband will certainly have to pay your consequences."

She was silent. For a full minute, she was as still as stone.

"Why?" she said.

"Because, to start with, the death of Dan Grimes must be paid for by someone. Because, to continue,

Jerome Quintin is in the most vulnerable position. Because, to finish, he's now expendable. Ira Boniface, at this moment, is probably the most powerful man in this state. He doesn't have the same regard for Jerome Quintin that Dan Grimes had, and he won't have the same plans. He doesn't even like Quintin, as a matter of fact, and I've got an idea he'd be happy for a chance to dispose of him permanently. In less than a day I've learned that much, and you know it better than I do. There may be no case now, no real evidence, but it won't be too hard for Boniface to arrange it."

She stood up and walked over to the edge of the dock. I sat and looked at her thin body against the bright water and distant dark trees. After a while she spoke to me without turning.

"I was in our cottage when he came in and passed out in the chair. I started back to the other cottage, and then I saw the stringer, and I had a feeling that it had all been planned for me. I felt a kind of compulsion. I picked up the stringer and went back and killed him. It's odd, isn't it? I killed to save my husband's soul, and now I must confess to the killing to save his life. What you said is true, and I was foolish not to see last night, when I asked you to take me away, that it would be this way. Well, it would be all right, I think, if only I could feel that it's worth it. But I don't. Now that I've done what I have, and must do what I must, I understand that Jerry's worth none of it. I should simply have left him and gone away. Will you do me a favor?"

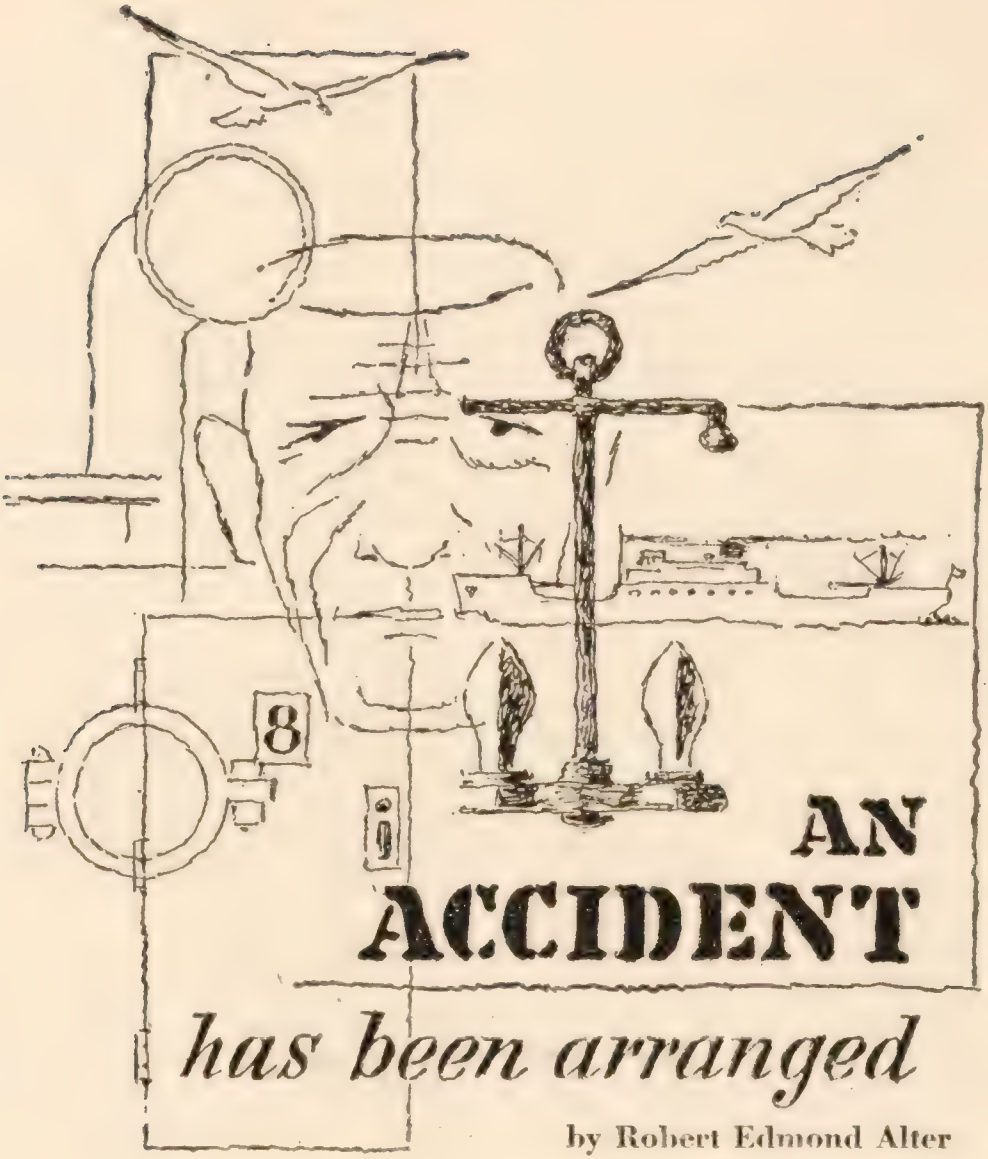
"If I can."

"Will you please go up and ask that fat sheriff to come down? Perhaps he can take me away immediately in his boat. I don't think I could bear to face the others."

"All right," I said.

I stood and turned and started up the slope. I was about half way up when the inboard roared to life behind me. I didn't stop or turn my head.

When we find her, I thought, *tomorrow, or the day after, or one of the days after, she will no longer look like a high-fashion model, or anyone I ever saw or knew, and it will be like looking at another person entirely.*



AN ACCIDENT has been arranged

by Robert Edmond Alter

There is nothing like a sea voyage, especially with an assassin aboard, for complete relaxation. When I go forth on a trip of this kind, I always take a tingling mystery novel along for perusal while lolling on deck, and a bullet-proof vest for that "let the rest of the world go-by" feeling.

KENNETH MORGAN closed his compartment door behind him and stood for a moment in the quiet passageway frowning at the doorknob. He wished there was some sort of lock for the cabin; he hated to walk off and leave his cameras unprotected. But there wasn't any help for it. He certainly didn't want to spend the entire trip from Bali to Sydney in the close confines of the dingy cabin watching his equipment. The grimy tanker *Arafura* was not in any sense a passenger ship. She contained ten compartments amidship that could be used at the captain's discretion, but in Morgan's mind they were worse than steerage.

However, he had no right to kick. If it hadn't been for a certain Mr. Regis canceling his passage suddenly, Morgan would have remained stuck in Kubu for another month; and what with the troubles between Government and the rebels at the moment, Bali was not the most attractive place for a free-lance photographer, or for any tourist.

He proceeded down the dim passageway, up the stairs, and entered the small saloon. It was metal-walled, bright with electricity. The scuffed deck hidden unsuccessfully with a scrap of rug. Ancient rattan chairs clumped around small deal-tables. And Morgan's fellow passengers were sitting silently, almost moodily, in the creaking chairs—some with drinks, tobacco, others with nothing. The Chinese steward filled in as bartender.

They were not a very imposing lot, he thought. A Dutchman or two, a fat woman with red squinty eyes and obvious sinus trouble, an Eurasian girl as cold, fragile and proud as a Ming vase, three English schoolboys, a planter with a whisky habit and a nose to match, two frightened spinsters fluttering like moths in a corner, a Chinese merchant with shrewd eyes and bloated torso, and a gangly, broad-shouldered European with a craggy, ageless face and a briefcase that he held tightly clutched to him with one arm.

Morgan hesitated, wondering if he should order a drink and try to strike up an acquaintance with one of them. He decided against it. All seemed absorbed in their own narrow little worlds, giving him the impression they would not welcome an invader. He walked across the saloon, opened the door, and stepped out onto the bridge deck, feeling suddenly uplifted and free as the dark mist hurried over his face and hands with its tiny moist needle-fingers. He moved to the starboard rail, edging around the aft boat davit, and stared out at the nothingness of the black Indian Ocean. His left elbow rested on the extreme corner of the rail; beyond that was nothing. The *Arafura* was run in a slipshod manner. There weren't even guard-chains, only the vacant space through which the

davits swung the lifeboat. Below was the open sea.

Behind him the saloon door opened and closed quickly, cutting short the thick shaft of smoky yellow light. Morgan turned his head, saw the craggy-faced man coming toward him with the briefcase, and smiled.

"Pleasant out here," he offered.

The man said nothing. His head turned smoothly, glancing right and left, and he crowded around the davit close to Morgan. Morgan started to step aside without thinking, then remembered there was only the open space at his back and checked himself. "Be careful . . ." he began.

The man seemed to stumble on the davit box, lurching head and shoulders into Morgan's chest. Morgan gasped, his equilibrium ripped from his body, half-turned, seeing the rushing black water far below. Then his right hand captured something and he held tight, swung himself inboard.

The briefcase had slipped from the man's grasp, slapped onto the deck, spilling open. A darkly gleaming automatic slid a foot and stopped. Some papers fluttered in the wind and a half dozen or so pencils scattered. The craggy-faced man clutched for them desperately. Morgan, hanging to the lifeboard cover, stared at him.

"You almost knocked me overboard," he gasped.

The man made no reply, no apology. Someone was coming along the gangway. And the man was busily sweeping up his gun, pencils and papers, shoving them willy-nilly into his briefcase. With an amazed look, Morgan watched him turn and go, saw him disappear inside the saloon as a seaman unconcernedly scuttled up the companionway to the navigation deck.

In his rush, the man hadn't recovered everything that had spilled out of his briefcase. A slip of paper was flattened out against the starboard stanchion. And there were a couple of pencils and scratch pad still on the deck.

Reflexively, Morgan snatched up the piece of paper before it might be blown out to sea. His first thought was to return it to the man, but that individual's odd behavior caused him to move closer to the light from the saloon port and look at what was written on the paper.

> J.—You will take passage on the Arafura in Kubu. The man you want is traveling under the name 'Regis.' You will arrange an accident for him. Under no condition is he to reach Sydney. Regis' compartment will be #8.
>
> Lan.

Morgan folded the paper. The address was simply BOX 43, Singaradja, Bali. Amazing, he thought. An assassin. But he didn't know why he should be shocked. He

imagined that with all the turmoil in the Dutch East Indies, political assassins were quite the accepted thing. Well, it wasn't any of his business. He'd notify the ship's officers and then . . .

He unfolded the paper, hurriedly, staring at it. Mr. Regis . . . Compartment #8. That was *his* compartment.

The man with the briefcase was still in the saloon, standing alone at the bar, drinking beer. He seemed startled to see Morgan approach, confused when Morgan held out the piece of paper.

"You dropped this," Morgan said tightly. "Look, friend, I don't know you, don't want to. Your business with Mr. Regis is your own business. My name is Morgan. I'm a free-lance photographer, an American on my way home. Regis cancelled his passage—I took his compartment . . ."

The man snatched the paper and brushed past Morgan without a sound. Morgan frowned and looked at the other passengers. None of them seemed to be paying him any attention. The Chinese merchant was nearest. Morgan bent down and spoke to him:

"Did you see that man that just left? He tried to murder me."

The merchant said something in Chinese. Morgan straightened up and sighed. The Eurasian girl was out of the question, of course—as was the fat woman, the three schoolboys, and the two spinsters. He approached one of the Dutchmen and said, "Pardon me, I've got myself in a bind. You see, there's a political assassin on board. He's made a mistake, but I can't seem to reason with him. I don't even know his name. I thought if . . ."

The Dutchman's pouchy eyes popped wide at Morgan. He made a funny sort of noise in his throat, then muttered what sounded like *Gott in Himmel,* shook his beefy face and hurried off.

Scowling, Morgan went to the planter. "Do you know there's a political assassin on board this ship?" he asked.

The florid planter grinned and offered Morgan his bottle. "Sure—sure there ish. Ashashins, thieves, drunks—all kinds people. Have—have a little drink."

Morgan left him in disgust.

The first mate, an Australian, was coming down from the navigation deck. Morgan stopped him on the companionway and explained what had happened. He had the feeling that the officer was listening to him with an incredulous air. "Oh, I say!" the first mate exclaimed. "You must be mistaken!"

"I'm not." Morgan told him. "I saw the gun, read the note. Why the man tried to kill me! Can't you understand? He thought I was Regis."

"Well, what did he say when you confronted him?"

"Nothing. He was frightened and ran away. I want you to do something about it. I don't want the fool to kill me, you know."

"All right, all right, don't worry about it. I'll check with the purser and find out who he is. We'll take care of him. I think you had better go to your cabin and remain there. You see, it's just possible—if all of this is true—that he doesn't believe you."

But in his cabin a new surprise was awaiting Morgan. An automatic was laying on his bunk.

Morgan understood cameras, but guns were out of his line. However, he had enough presence of mind to check and see if the weapon had a loaded clip. It had. He couldn't imagine how the gun had come there, could only make a wild guess that one of his fellow passengers, say the Dutchman or the Chinese merchant, had taken pity on him and had slipped him the means of defending himself. One thing was certain, he was tired of asking other people to help him. The gun they had offered him was enough of an assist. Now he would face the man with the briefcase and drum some sense into him; make him understand that he was not this Regis fellow.

Morgan was not a fighter, despised violence, but he had a streak of personal heroism in his makeup that was as uncompromising as an iron bar. He wouldn't allow himself to be pushed around. And he hated a waiting game. So he left his cabin with the gun in his jacket pocket.

Number 7 was across the way, light off, no sound. He opened the door cautiously and listened to the the faint sound of breathing. A sharp voice asked, "Who's there?" He closed the door. The schoolboys.

The light was on in Number 6. A soft voice was singing an off-beat tune. The girl with the Ming vase face. Someone was wheezing and snuffling in 5. The fat woman with sinus trouble. Numbers 4 and 3 were empty. The Chinese merchant opened the door of Number 1 and peered at him for a moment, shut it softly. Number 2 was empty. A thin voice squeeked high terror when he opened Number 9. The two spinsters. He murmured something to calm them and proceeded down to Number 10. Empty. The two Dutchmen, the drunken planter, and the man with the briefcase were still awake somewhere else on the ship.

He went back up to the saloon. The planter had passed out at his table. The two Dutchmen were sitting in a corner talking gutturally. They paused, staring at him with frightened eyes. He ignored them and stepped out on the bridge deck. It was deserted. The night whimpered softly and the mist swirled in loose eddies. He went forward and looked down on the

shadowy maindeck, tracing the skeleton-like catwalk with his eye to the bow. Nothing.

He walked along and looked down at the after maindeck, seeing the fifteen oil ducts gleaming with moisture, the conduit lines crossing and recrossing each other, the winch, pipe and valves, kingposts and secured booms, and the long-drawn spidery catwalk to the after house and engine room. A man was standing below him on the catwalk, just before the pipe rack. The man with the briefcase. His face was tilted upward, catching the wan light from the distant pilot house. He was staring at Morgan.

"You!" Morgan called. "Stay where you are. I want to talk to you."

He hurried across the gangway and clattered down the steps. But the man with the briefcase was already retreating along the catwalk, heading aft to the boat deck.

"Wait a minute!" Morgan shouted. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want you to understand that I'm not Regis!"

The man paused at the extreme end of the walk, under the black shadows of the boat deck, the pump room vent and two deck vents rising on either side of him like tall, peeled tree trunks. As Morgan came along the lurching catwalk he could see that the man was opening the briefcase, reaching inside it.

Morgan drew out his own gun and came closer. "All right," he called. "Leave that gun where it is. Be careful or I'll blow a hole through you."

The man was watching him, his craggy face sternly intent. Suddenly he threw the briefcase aside and his right hand emerged holding a long, bright, brittle object. He started forward.

Morgan aimed at the man's legs and squeezed the trigger, tensing himself for the expected blast. There was nothing. A harmless click. He looked at the gun stupidly, aimed it again and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The man was grinning at him, and in that moment Morgan understood who had given him the gun—a gun without a firing-pin. It was all a neat trap, baited with a phony weapon.

"I'm not Regis!" he cried again. "My name is Kenneth Morgan. I know you understand me; that letter of yours was written in English. I'm not the man you want!"

Suddenly, as the man loomed closer, Morgan saw what the assassin was holding in his right hand. A hypo. The point of the long slender needle captured a glint of bright light and sparked once. Morgan began backing up.

He understood quite clearly what was going to happen. An 'accident' had been arranged for Mr. Regis. A quick jab of the hypo, a shot of a powerful knockout, and one helpless man was lost overboard in the Indian Ocean.

"I'm not the person you want!" he cried. "What's wrong with you? Why won't you listen? *I'm not Regis!*"

The man said nothing. The tanker rolled easily, canting its deck. The man lurched, clutched the rail with his free hand and moved forward. Morgan fell back again.

He was stymied. He wasn't afraid of the man in a hand-to-hand struggle, but it would take only one little jab of the needle and he was through. He turned and started running along the catwalk.

The assassin's feet thudded hollow slams on the steel plating close at his heels. He looked up desperately at the looming superstructure of the amidships; the saloon, bridge, pilot house, and their round, frosted, merry lights winking and gleaming. So far away, so very far. And then his foot skidded on an oil slick.

His legs whipped back out beneath him and he slammed down hard, hands and knees, on the greasy catwalk. His mind screamed: *God, I'm going to die, and the fool doesn't know he has the wrong man!*

Something crashed into him heavily. He winced, tensing, expecting the sharp jab of the needle. It didn't come. The assassin tumbled headfirst over the rail, leaving a glassy shimmer of sound screaming behind him.

It was ten feet to the deck. The man pitched headlong into the pipe rack, his head wedging between two of the gleaming conduits; then his body flopped sideways and was still.

The mate and the purser were standing beside him, chopping up the blackness below with their flashlights. The mate turned and looked at Morgan.

"It was an accident," Morgan said, pleadingly. "He tumbled over me when I fell. I tell you I tried . . ."

"Hadn't we better get below?" the mate said.

"Before he went over," Morgan had to prove his innocence, "and even earlier, I tried time and again to convince him I wasn't Regis, but he wouldn't listen."

The purser sniffed and snapped off his torch. "Shouldn't wonder," he said. "That was Mr. Phillips . . . at least that's the name he came aboard with. He was a deaf mute."

"A deaf mute?" Morgan echoed incredulously.

The purser nodded. "Perfectly lost," he said, "without pencil and paper. You know how they are."

Don't blame the police for not solving crimes which require thought. They simply have not the time for ratiocination. Just think, if you will, of the hours consumed in merely walking with the slow deliberate steps of authority towards a traffic violator. And this is but one of their many time-consuming activities.

SAM'S CONSCIENCE

by Douglas Farr

THE CHIEF leaned far back in his leather chair, planted his heels on the top of his mahogany desk. "So tell me, Lieutenant," he said. "The Morgan case . . ."

The Lieutenant hesitated uncertainly. "There are curious coincidences," he began.

"Coincidences, uh huh."

"So I've been trying to deduce . . ."

"Deduce!" The Chief's body remained placid, but a thundercloud in the shape of a frown passed over and darkened his broad, flat face. "What are you, Nero Wolfe or a cop? Deduce! Easier to sit around and deduce than to get out and do the legwork, is that it?"

The Lieutenant was not thin-skinned, not after having dealt with the Chief for so many years. Now he deemed it practical to show humility and respect for a greater mind than his own. "Would you please let me explain, sir? Frankly, I need guidance on this, sir. And I'd like you to decide what I should do next on this case, sir."

Mollified, pacified, the Chief nodded. "Go on, Lieutenant."

"Well, to begin with, sir, this Sam Morgan is a burglar."

"Burglar? I thought he was . . ."

"I mean, *was* a burglar. I was deducing, you see, sir. Sam Morgan actually has a record, I found out. One conviction for burglary in 1946. Served two and a half years. Time off for good behavior. Very good behavior. Sam was a model prisoner. Warden was really sorry to lose him. All right, late in 1948, Sam is released from prison. Is never picked up again. Fact Number One. Fact Number Two, Sam can give only a very vague account of how he made his living in the past ten years. Odd job here and there, of course. But they are only cover-ups probably. Sam's first love is burglary. He remains a burglar by profession."

"You deduce that, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Based on my experience with all types of criminals. Of course Sam is not the usual type burglar. Sam is what you might call a burglar of the old school. He is a small man, nimble, wiry, quick. Like a cat. And like a cat, he can get in almost anywhere. He is a mild-mannered man, with no visible bad habits. He does not burglarize to buy dope, or to support fancy women, or anything like that. He is a burglar because he has a natural talent for it. He likes it. He prefers to do it more than doing other things. In a way, he does not really look upon himself as a criminal. A gentle burglar. In a small, unassuming way, a gentleman burglar. Unfortunately a vanishing type."

The Chief sighed nostalgically. "Unfortunately . . ."

The Lieutenant took courage from the other's mellow mood. "Now I am deducing here again, sir, as I reconstruct the history of Sam. If you'll be patient, I'll bring in other facts, other coincidences, sir. But for the moment I deduce. Sam, I think, has a partner in crime, another character with a known burglary record. Sidney Tepper . . ."

"Tepper! You mean . . . ?"

"I see, sir, you're beginning to make your own deductions," the Lieutenant interrupted hastily. "But allow me to go on, sir. Now I'll admit I have no proof—and can't possibly get any proof—that Sam Morgan and Sidney Tepper are associated any time in this period 1948 to the present. But I deduce. You see, their talents are in a way complementary. They make a natural team. Sam, who is very good at getting into places, and Sidney who has the contacts with the fences and can dispose of the loot. Sam the artist, and Sidney the business man. You admit this makes a good team, sir?"

"Oh, sure . . ."

"Now I bring in another case, sir, the Garman case. You remember the name Max Garman. Let me speculate on what possibly—I say possibly — happened to Max Garman. In this particular year—last year, 1958—our friend Sam Morgan is working as a shoe salesman. Now this I checked. Sam Morgan is not very interested in his shoe selling job. He shows up for work only about half the time, and when he does show up, he doesn't sell many shoes. The owner of the shoe store told me he kept Sam around only because Sam seemed to be such a nice guy. So it's just a cover-up job maybe?"

"Yes, maybe."

"All right. Now let's suppose Sam and Sidney are working together in 1958. The Garman job is a typical one calling for Sam's and Sidney's special talents. Furs and jewelry lying around the house because Max Garman likes to buy pretty things for his wife Leona, but there's not much cash around.

The house has good locks, but that's all right with Sam. Now, Chief, let's suppose it was Sam and Sidney who were at the Garman house in 1958 . . ."

The Chief took his feet off the desk top and sat up straight. The thundercloud was on his face again. "You're theorizing, Lieutenant . . ."

The Lieutenant wasn't to be stopped though. And he had a bit of the blarney in him. "No, Chief, I'm presenting you a combination of facts, coincidences, and possibilities. Then I'm going to ask you to theorize."

For a moment the Chief continued to eye his underling suspiciously. But then he seemed to catch the implication and admission of his superior authority and brain power. He subsided again, leaned back, bestowed his heavy heels once more on the patient desk top.

"Proceed, Lieutenant."

"Let's say then that Sam and Sidney did the Garman job. We don't know they did, of course, but for the moment let's assume. Sam probably is the one who goes into the house first. Maybe Sidney doesn't get a chance to go in at all, because the whole thing happens so fast. But Sam gets the surprise of his life. I checked this on Leona Garman's old testimony. That night, of all nights, she and Max had a fight. Max decided to sleep downstairs on the sofa. Now what burglar would expect to find the man of the house sleeping on the sofa? Sam is no strong-arm boy. He never hit anybody in his life. He's not looking for trouble. He wants to get in quietly, get out quietly. But there's Max Garman on the sofa. Maybe he wakes up, or maybe he's not even asleep. He hears Sam come in. Max has a gun—remember, the gun checked out as Max's gun all right. He gets the gun and takes a shot in the dark at Sam. Misses. Then there's a scuffle. Sam is wiry and quick. Max Garman is slow and fat. Sam doesn't want to kill anybody. All he wants to do is get away. But that fool Max won't let well enough alone. There's a scuffle. Max gets shot with his own gun. And all Sam was trying to do was defend himself; so Max is killed in self-defense."

"Homicide," the Chief intoned judicially, "while committing a felony is first-degree murder, not self-defense."

"Yes, sir. But you can't blame Sam for trying not to get shot."

"Assuming it was Sam who was in the Garman house that night."

"That's right, sir. Assuming. Now let me go on, sir. If you'll remember, Chief, we never solved the Garman case. And if you'll remember also, the case got an awful lot of newspaper publicity. Man murdered while defending his home. That kind of thing. Pictures of the widow and her two orphaned children. Real good sob stuff. The papers played it up big.

Now I go on deducing, sir. Would it be strange if Sam Morgan followed the story in the papers and was awfully bothered by it? Remember, sir, our gentle burglar type. A man with a conscience."

"Assuming it was Sam who shot Max Garman?"

"Oh yes, sir. Assuming."

The Chief stared at the ceiling. His mood wasn't easy to guess. His tone of voice had been flat, unemotional, unrevealing. He could be going along. Or he could be waiting to pounce.

"Proceed with your fabrications, Lieutenant," he said.

The Lieutenant swallowed. He had fifteen years on the force that he was laying on the line. He'd said Sam Morgan had a conscience. Well, he had one too. Therefore he had to continue. Probably the Chief wouldn't let him stop now even if he wanted to. Fifteen years on the force...

"Yes, sir," he said. "It was hard to check with the shoe store owner, because he doesn't have good records of that kind of thing. But he seems to remember that about the time of the Garman murder, Sam doesn't come to work for about two or three weeks. What's he doing all this time? Maybe, I say, maybe he's having an attack of conscience. A gentle man, who never hurt a fly, suddenly he's a killer. And there's those stories and pictures in the papers, torturing him. Sam has a soft heart for widows and orphans. He is going crazy. A nice woman doesn't have a husband any more and two nice kids don't have a father any more on account of him. Confessing the crime won't do these people any good. What will? Only one thing, Sam finally figures. Max Garman has to be replaced."

The Chief glanced across the desk through slitted eyes. "Sam Morgan married the Widow Garman, that we know," he said sagely.

"Yes, sir, that we know. I tried some subtle questioning on this angle, you see. I tried not to let on what I had in mind. But I questioned Sam and I questioned his new wife, the former Mrs. Garman. I tried to get the picture—how they met, why they got married. I didn't get much. Only this. Sam seems to have shown up in Leona Garman's life for the first time about a month after Max Garman was killed. He gives her some vague story of having known Max and wants to know if he can help out in any way. The kids take to him from the beginning. Which gives him the excuse to come back. This goes on for months. Now what is Sam doing? Maybe he has marriage in mind from the beginning, maybe not. Maybe at first he tries to serve as a temporary companion, and then one thing leads to another. In any case, when the proper year has passed, the Widow Garman becomes Mrs. Sam Mor-

gan. Does Sam actually like this marriage arrangement? Frankly I don't know. He doesn't talk any more than he has to. The new Mrs. Morgan ain't no beauty and she ain't no spring chicken either. But maybe Sam is happy because he's doing his duty. He's paying his debt to society."

"Assuming," said the Chief, "that Sam shot Max Garman?"

"Assuming, naturally. There is this unexplained fact, though. We have no record, no way of knowing that Sam actually knew Max, as he told the widow he did. Where or how did Sam know Max? We have only Sam's word, very vague. And Max is dead. And why, all of a sudden, out of the blue, did Sam come to the Garman house and start playing with the orphans? This is a strange coincidence, Chief."

"Uh huh."

"Now we come to the final piece of the puzzle," the Lieutenant said. "Where is Sidney Tepper all this time?"

"Assuming that Sidney was Sam's old partner?"

"Assuming, yes."

"Did you check for stoolies? Anybody that could link Sam and Sidney as partners? Or that they even knew each other?"

The Lieutenant swallowed in embarrassment. This was the weak part of his case, and he knew it. But he couldn't lie, even if he wanted to.

"I ran a pretty thorough check on that," he said. "Didn't turn up anything."

"But wouldn't you think . . . ?"

"Yes, sir, you'd think that if Sam and Sidney had been partners, somebody would have known about it. Unless . . . unless Sam and Sidney were very clever and secretive. Which I think they were. And which is why they never served second sentences, either of them. They were smart. They profited from their first mistakes."

"Uh huh."

"Well then, let's take Sidney now. He is with Sam the night Sam has to shoot Max. So he is technically guilty of first-degree murder also. But he does not have the conscience Sam has. And maybe also he is less disturbed because he didn't actually pull the trigger on Max. He lays low. Maybe the partnership is permanently dissolved. But Sidney also reads the papers. Every good burglar does. He reads about the widow and the orphans, but he doesn't cry. Then a year later, he reads a marriage license notice or something. Sam Morgan marrying Leona Garman. Here are two familiar names. But two people he certainly didn't expect would get married. Obviously Leona doesn't know who Sam really is. But Sam certainly knows who Leona is. Why in the hell, Sidney asks himself, is Sam marrying the widow of the man he shot? And Sidney comes up with an an-

swer completely different from Sam's."

"Which is?"

"Which is this. That Sam's motives are not humanitarian. Maybe Sidney does the same checking that I did. And he finds out that Max Garman did indeed have quite a little bundle of life insurance. Slightly over a hundred grand, in fact. Enough to make Sam overlook the fact Leona ain't no spring chicken, and also to keep him from having silly ideas about a man shouldn't marry the widow of a man he has killed."

The Chief had pressed the fingerends of his two hands together in a kind of praying gesture. "So Sidney thinks of blackmail?"

"Exactly, Chief!" The Lieutenant said it with unnecessarily warm enthusiasm. The Chief needed to be encouraged in this deduction business.

"What then?" the Chief asked.

"Sidney contacts his old friend Sam. Very bluntly he asks the question which is bothering him. And when he hears Sam's answer he laughs. Conscience? Sidney doesn't know what it is. He is a cynic. Also, as you point out, Chief, he is a blackmailer. He asks Sam for his cut. Sam maybe gets mad, but he also sees that Sidney can make trouble for him. All right, he tells Sidney, so you think I married Leona for her money. But how can I give you a cut? All right, even if I control the money myself, how can I explain giving a wad of it away? I can't tell her why I had to give it to you, can I? On this point, I think, Sidney, being a smart lad, agrees. In fact, he has probably thought of the difficulty already. You can't explain giving it away, Sam, he says. But you can see to it that a certain amount of cash is lying around the house on a certain night. And you can also see to it that the house is not too hard to get into."

The Chief pursed his mouth thoughtfully. "Not a bad idea for Sidney to think of," he said. "Assuming . . ."

"Sure, Chief. Assuming. Okay, the night is arranged. The set-up is agreed on. Sidney, plying his old trade, enters the old Garman house, now the Morgan house. Kind of history repeating itself, in a way. Only this time it turns out much differently. Sam has not had a fight with Leona, but he is waiting in the dark living room anyway. And he has a gun like old Max had. But he's cleverer than Max was. And he shoots straighter. Knowing that the first pay-off to a blackmailer is seldom the last one, he shoots Sidney right in the heart."

The Chief dragged his heels off the desk top and sat up ponderously. "Which is what happened, of course," he said. "Sam Morgan shot an intruder entering his house illegally, which he had every right to do. Defense of property. Self-defense."

"Right, Chief. We can't touch Sam as long as his self-defense story holds up."

The Chief's eyes bored into the Lieutenant's own. "Well, does it hold up or doesn't it?"

"On the surface, yes. But there are these coincidences I mentioned. Sam's burglary record, one known offense. His curious job record after prison. The curious fact of an old burglar's marrying the widow of a man who was shot by a burglar. And the whole odd business of two burglaries in the same house, both ending in homicide."

"You're a numbskull, Lieutenant. You can't arrest Sam Morgan on evidence like that, much less convict him."

"Yes, sir, I realize that."

"Then what are you telling me this story for?" The Chief heaved his vast bulk out of his squeaking chair. He towered over the Lieutenant. "What in hell am I supposed to do?"

The Lieutenant put on his best air of humility. "You're supposed to deduce now, sir. You're supposed to tell me what to do next. I could check some more. I could double check. I could grill Sam. I could ask Leona some very personal questions which I haven't asked yet..."

"Lieutenant, the police department doesn't exist to annoy honest citizens like Leona Morgan."

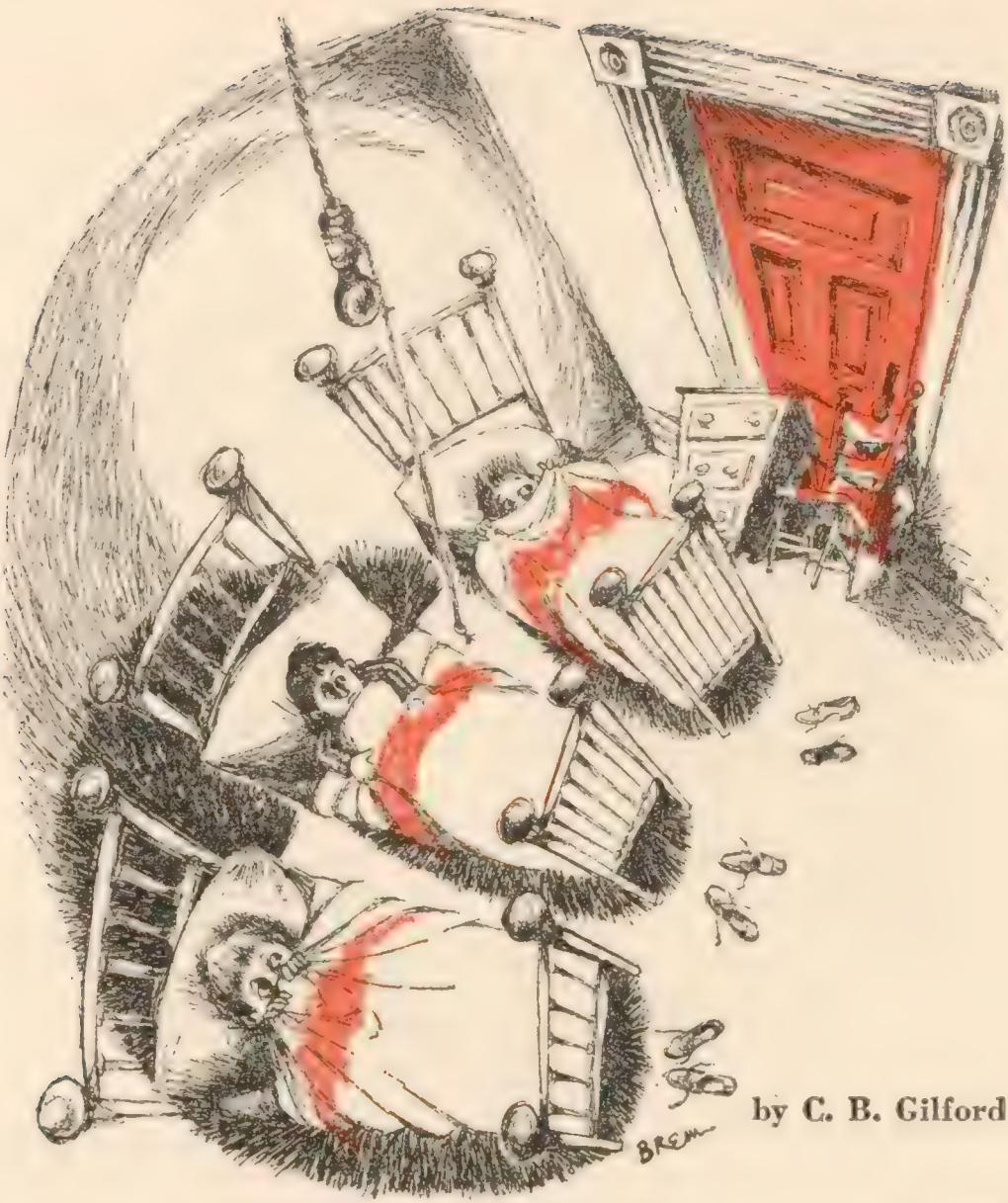
"What shall I do then, sir? Call the case closed, or shall I go on assuming...?"

The Chief exploded at that. He was rather famous for megaton-force explosions. This was one of them. He talked for about ten minutes. He didn't throw the Lieutenant off the force. Didn't even demote him. Possibly he didn't think of it. His tirade, briefly, added up to something like this: "You'll assume nothing further, Lieutenant. You'll stop being an armchair detective and start being a cop. You can call the Morgan case closed."

The Lieutenant's reply, oft-repeated, consisted of: "Yes, sir."

And after that ten minutes of vituperation, he walked out gratefully into the fresh air. He felt good. He still had an instinct, an intuition, that the story he'd told the Chief, how Max Garman and Sidney Tepper had been shot by the same man at the same address, was essentially true, give or take a detail here and there. But he'd received an order. The case was closed. And a really decent burglar wouldn't be bothered.

Sam's conscience was clear. And so was the Lieutenant's.



by C. B. Gilford

Naturally, school must offer more than reading, writing and arithmetic. Boys should be taught to bow and girls to curtsy. And to further prepare the young for life as it is lived today, this subject should be required: How to behave with propriety when introduced to a murderer.

The COLDBROOK CRIME

IN THOSE DAYS there were two terrors in my young life, Sylvia Orlander and Old Grimes. Sylvia was a girl just my age over at the female academy, Sunnyside. Old Grimes—I still don't know his Christian name if he had one, we just called him Old Grimes—was one of our teachers at Coldbrook. I don't know which was the most terrifying. Sylvia was . . . well, I'll go into that later. Maybe Old Grimes was really the worse one. Legally worse anyway. After all, he committed murder.

The three of us saw him do it. Or almost saw him, that is, because it was pretty dark. The three of us meaning Hugh Paxton, Norman Richardson, and myself, Peter Blake. Three eye-witnesses, that's pretty dependable evidence for murder, seems to me. Even in the dark.

It was a Friday night in spring, and we'd sneaked out of the dormitory. There wasn't any place for boys of our age to go. If we'd been seen in the village, we'd have been reported to the school—the villagers were nasty that way. We just wanted freedom on that Friday night with no lessons to do. Lots of the boys had gone home for the weekend, but our parents weren't that devoted or that anxious for our company. So we just sneaked out and walked along the lake shore and breathed the free air. Coldbrook, you see, is on a lake, and by what mysterious process it got its name, I don't know.

We were on our way back to the dormitory, and maybe it was about ten o'clock. We'd gotten almost to the boathouse where the school kept its several canoes and rowboats, so we were being pretty quiet. Being quiet, we were able to hear the voices. We stopped, not concerned about what the people those voices belonged to were doing, but concerned that they might see or hear us. We decided silently we'd be safer to wait right there till those people went away.

We couldn't distinguish any words, but we gradually discovered who the people were. One of the voices was female, and there weren't many females around Coldbrook. This voice had a nasal whine to it that was unmistakable. Miss Stanhope's voice. Miss Stanhope was the principal's secretary and the registrar of Coldbrook. Besides the nasal whine, she had fluffy yel-

low hair and slant-eyed glasses and a big mouth always covered with thick red lipstick. In spite of everything she tried to keep from being ugly, she was.

Identifying the other voice sent our hearts right down into our shoes. It was low, deep, like an animal's growl. It had growled English grammar and square roots and geography at us since last fall. It had the same menace in it as when it had first said to me, "Stand up, Blake, and say 'sir' every time you speak!" Old Grimes. No doubt about it.

Now we were sure we dare not move, what with Old Grimes himself down there on the dock. The voices kept it up, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes both talking together. They sounded angry too. Some kind of an argument was going on. We were a bit too young at the time to guess what Old Grimes and Miss Stanhope might have to argue about.

Maybe we were there—close to the boathouse—for five minutes, with those two voices going at each other incessantly out on the dock. Then it happened very quickly. Miss Stanhope was talking, her whiny voice getting higher and higher, and suddenly it was cut off, right in the middle sort of. As if she'd put her hand over her mouth. Or as if Old Grimes had put his hand over her mouth.

There was no sound at all then for about a minute. Absolute silence. It was a windless night, so that the lake was scarcely stirring at all, not even lapping against the piles. And after the silence there were no more voices.

Only strange little sounds. Hard to identify. Maybe things being moved or dragged across the board floor of the dock. Heavy breathing. Then footsteps and noises inside the boathouse. That was our chance to escape, if Grimes was inside the boathouse, but I suppose we were too curious by that time.

There was no moon that night, but there were stars out and a few lights along the shore. In that dim illumination we saw the rowboat emerging. But there seemed to be only one person in it, probably Grimes. The oarlocks made scraping sounds and the blades of the oars made soft splashes in the water. Old Grimes certainly seemed to be trying to be quiet about whatever he was doing.

We saw the boat heading out toward the middle of the lake. In another minute it was lost in the darkness, though the sounds of it still came faintly across the water.

"Let's go now," Hugh whispered.

"Miss Stanhope is still around," Norman said. "She wasn't in the boat. She might see us."

At the moment that argument seemed perfectly logical. If Miss Stanhope wasn't in the boat, she was still on the dock. And if she saw us prowling around she'd certainly speak up about it.

So we continued to wait. Maybe four or five minutes more. While the sounds of the rowboat faded away completely, and then while we began to hear them again. The boat was returning. We saw it emerge from the gloom, from the same direction where we'd seen it go. Still just one person in it too. We were sure now that that one person was Grimes.

He returned the boat to the boathouse. We could hear him stowing it. Then he came out and his footsteps came along the boards. He passed within ten feet of us as he started to climb back up the slope toward the school. We saw him quite clearly then.

Old Grimes with his wide sloping shoulders and his long arms dangling lower than a human being's ought to dangle, and his bushy black hair that added a couple of inches to his height and helped make him seem so enormous. We even saw his face for a second, because it seemed to glisten in the starlight as he passed, as if maybe it was covered with sweat. Everything of Grimes' face was there, the thick eyebrows that made an unbroken line above his eyes, the eye-sockets deep and cavernous, the oversized nose, the big, down-at-the-corners mouth.

We stood like statues and watched him ascend the hill. He was wearing a dark suit, and he blended quickly into the shadows and disappeared.

"Where's Miss Stanhope?" Norman asked.

But I think by that time even our dim brains were beginning to suspect something. We shivered a little, though the air wasn't cold.

"Why don't we go look?" Hugh said. "We know she was there. We heard her."

We went as silently and stealthily as we could. We looked on the dock. We explored the boathouse rather thoroughly.

"Maybe," Norman said, "Old Grimes rowed her across the lake and left her there."

"We didn't see her in the boat, did we?" I argued. "And Old Grimes could never have rowed across the lake in that time. Besides, he was rowing slow, trying to be quiet."

"Where is she then?"

Standing there with my two friends in the utter blackness of the boathouse, I felt little cold prickles go up my spine. None of us wanted to voice the answer to that question, which was nevertheless more obvious all the time.

"Old Grimes wouldn't do a thing like that," Hugh said.

"Oh, wouldn't he?" Norman said.

"Well, we know she was here, and she isn't here now," I said.

"We didn't see her go out in the boat with Grimes," Norman said. "But she could have been lying in the bottom of the boat. I mean . . . her body . . . could have been . . ."

It was too terrifying to talk about in that first moment. But we all had the same idea. Miss Stanhope's voice being cut off suddenly . . . Grimes had awfully strong hands, as all our ears could testify . . . a body in the bottom of the boat . . . then thrown overboard out in the middle of the lake . . . and Grimes coming back alone.

"I guess we ought to tell somebody," I suggested, "or call the police."

We mentally chewed on that for awhile. That picture was only less terrifying.

"Suppose it isn't true?" Hugh said. Hugh wasn't the bravest of us three. He was always finding good reasons not to do something. "We didn't see anything. Suppose the police can't find the body. Then they'll let Old Grimes go. What do you think he'll do to the ones who told on him?"

The cold prickles on my spine got really ice-cold then. What would Grimes do? Give us more homework? Or flunk us out? Or twist our arms till the bones broke? Or would he catch us right here on a night about as dark as this?

"Maybe we'd better wait till they find the body," Norman suggested. "Dead bodies always float, don't they? We can tell the police then."

We agreed finally on that. We went back up to the dormitory and climbed back in through a certain window we knew about. We undressed and got into bed with nobody the wiser. Then we tried to sleep.

I didn't for a long time. I kept thinking Old Grimes was going to open the door of our room and slip in, and then I'd see his face like I'd seen it down by the boathouse, all shining because it was covered with sweat. And he'd bend over my bed . . .

We were all a lot braver on Saturday morning when the sun was full and bright. We were among the first to eat breakfast. We consulted at that time, and decided hopefully that the first thing to do was to see if maybe Miss Stanhope wasn't still around somewhere.

So we sidled over to the principal's office. On a Saturday forenoon Miss Stanhope was usually to be seen there in the outer enclosure, typing savagely away. This morning she wasn't.

Optimistically viewed, this fact still wasn't conclusive. So we embarked upon a planned program of spying and eavesdropping. Norman was to stick around close to the principal's office. Hugh would scout the territory of Miss Stanhope's living quarters, and I was to go back and comb the dock and boathouse for clues. We would meet at noon.

My own particular search was fruitless. Maybe a detective could have found something, but I didn't. Everything looked disappointingly normal.

Bloodstains, there were none. But then choking and strangling don't leave bloodstains. I found no evidence of Miss Stanhope's having been there at all. No buttons, bits of cloth, cigarette butts, wristwatches, or jewelry. I investigated both the dock and the boathouse. And the boat that Grimes must have used.

I was pretty discouraged when I met the others at lunch, but both of them had news. Added together, it came to something like this. Miss Stanhope was indeed gone. She had left a note on her desk, saying she was quitting her job "for personal reasons." And she seemed to have taken a single suitcase with her. But nobody had seen her go, or knew how or exactly when she went. There was quite a bit of excitement about it among the teachers, but they were trying to keep it from the boys. Also, Norman had seen Old Grimes, who was indulging in his usual Saturday custom of sitting out in the middle of the green with his easel and canvas and brushes, and snarling at any boy who dared to try to peek to see if he was really painting.

"Old Grimes is the only one," Norman concluded, "who looks like he doesn't care what happened to Miss Stanhope."

"That's because he already knows what happened to her," I said.

But none of us were willing to go to the principal with our information or to phone up the police.

"They'll find the body soon," Hugh said, "and then we can tell."

"I'll bet she had that suitcase with her," Norman argued, "and I'll bet Grimes tied it to the body so it would stay down. Maybe it won't float up at all. Maybe they could drag the lake though if we told."

"And what if they couldn't find the body?" Hugh said. "Then they'd say we just lied about Old Grimes."

Again we shuddered at the vision of what Old Grimes would do to us in a case like that.

"The police will find out she's missing though," I pointed out.

Norman the dissenter shook his head. "Who's going to tell the police she's gone?"

And there we were still. We knew now that Miss Stanhope had vanished. But we didn't dare say anything yet for fear our story might not be supported, and then we'd have to face Old Grimes.

"We still ought to tell somebody," I said.

"You do it, Peter," they both said.

"No," I said, "we'd better wait and see. If the body is weighted down with a suitcase, it'll stay there for a while."

Guilty as we felt about our silence, we decided to keep things as they were for a while yet. Maybe it was because we had the horrible feeling that Grimes could, if he wanted to, send us all down to join Miss Stanhope at the bottom of the lake.

Meanwhile, there was the other pressing problem. Saturday afternoons were the times when poor fish like us were carted over to the weekly tea-dance at Sunnyside. "To learn to dance, the art of polite conversation, and other social graces." Those who weren't rescued by their parents on weekends, always had to go over to Sunnyside whether they liked it or not. And the parents of those vultures over there always left them there to receive us.

We rode over in the bus—it was about ten miles—about two o'clock. Old Grimes rode with us. He was often chosen for this job because he could make us behave better than any of the other teachers. And besides, being one of the bachelors, he was more available. Miss Stanhope had sometimes gone on this trip too, and suddenly I realized that she had gone mostly when Grimes was going too.

I mentioned my deduction to the others.

"There was something between them," Norman remarked sagely.

But at that age we didn't understand fully what that something could have been.

We disembarked sullenly at the front door of Sunnyside, and Grimes herded us inside like a sheep dog herds sheep, snarling and barking at our heels if we tried to lag behind. Once inside the place, however, his job was considerably lessened because the harpies took over. Our entrance into the building was heralded by their squeals of fiendish delight.

Of course Sylvia Orlander was in the van. I tried to hide. I even tried to offer myself to Betsy Farquhar, who was slightly less repulsive than Sylvia. But that didn't stop Sylvia. She barged right in between us, took one of my arms, and barged right out again with me before poor Betsy even realized a contest was on.

"Well, Peter Blake!" Sylvia began as she sailed away with me as her prize. "You were trying to make me jealous with Betsy Farquhar, weren't you? Now don't say you weren't, Peter, because I'll have you know I understand boys. I've known lots of boys. But you're one of the nicest. Did I ever tell you that, Peter? Did I ever tell you you were one of the nicest? I know you are, because I've known plenty of boys to compare you with . . ."

It went on like that, endless, meaningless. I never knew which made me more sick, listening to Sylvia Orlander, or looking at her. Sometimes, as I tried to do then, I concentrated on looking at her so I wouldn't hear her so much. Just then I concentrated on her nose. It was a lot more like a potato than a nose, I told myself. It was kind of the color of a white potato, which really isn't white at all, but more of a brownish gray. And a potato has no special shape, it's just a kind of a lump. And that's

what Sylvia's nose was, a lump.

By the time I'd made those final philosophical observations about Sylvia's nose, the party got a little more organized. They started serving punch from a big glass bowl. We all lined up single-file to get some. Old Grimes stood with his back against the wall behind the serving-table, nodding to each one of us as we got our cups of punch. He had a sort of fixed smile that he could put on his face for occasions like this, something that we knew wasn't a smile at all. What he was really doing, I think, was counting us as we passed, to make sure none of us had escaped.

After the punch, we danced. Most of the others managed to dance with different ones, but I had to dance with Sylvia all the time. She was larger and stronger than I was, and so she led. As her feet were pretty big too, my job was not so much to follow her but rather to keep out of the way.

"We girls have been talking all week about playing some kissing games," she said. "I think we're old enough, don't you Peter? But I don't suppose the chaperones would allow it."

Thank the Lord, I thought, for the chaperones. Thank the Lord even for Old Grimes.

The music stopped for another round of punch, then back to the dancing again. Me with Sylvia, of course.

"There's nothing morally wrong with kissing," she said. "It's a normal sign of affection. When a girl likes a boy she ought to kiss him."

She had her mind on kissing that day. And she spoke with passion. Her breath in my ear was like a blast of air from a furnace door.

It was about then that she maneuvered me over toward one of the doors leading to a corridor. "We've been doing sculpturing this week, Peter," she was saying. "Would you like to see some of my clay statues?"

I don't remember telling her I would, but before I knew what was happening, we were out that door and running down the corridor. We turned in at what I guess was the art room, because there was a lot of stuff sitting around. Sylvia closed this door behind us.

"There aren't any chaperones here now," she giggled.

"Let's see your statues," I said.

"We could play our kissing game right here if we wanted to." Her face was very close to mine, and all I could see was her big red mouth, all lipstick and teeth. There was a lot of lipstick even on her teeth.

"I'm very interested in statues," I said desperately. "Which . . . ?"

But Sylvia had her arms around my neck, and then her mouth on mine, and I couldn't say any more. The room full of statues started to swim in front of my wide-open eyes and my stomach started to turn upside down.

As I said, Sylvia was stronger than I was, but terror and despair gives you extra strength sometimes. I tugged her arms off my neck, and I even succeeded in pushing her back against one of the tables, and I think some of the statues fell over. I didn't wait to see. I turned and ran out of that door, down the corridor, and I ended up in the one place where I was safe from Sylvia, the boys' wash room.

I wasn't in there two minutes, looking at my green face smeared with red lipstick and wondering whether I was going to throw up, when who should walk in but Old Grimes. His face darkened and scowled, and an unholy fire lighted in his deep-set eyes. He towered over me, a giant.

"What have you been up to, Blake?" he asked finally, his voice like the roll of distant thunder. "You know you're not supposed to be kissing these young ladies."

"She kissed me, sir," I stuttered.

He frowned and squinted, so that I could hardly see his eyes at all, they were so deep down behind his eyebrows. "Blake," he said, "I believe you for once. Because you don't look as if you've been enjoying yourself."

"I haven't, sir," I said, amazed at his sudden kindness and understanding.

"But you've got a lesson to learn, Blake." He became stern again. "You've got to be stronger than any woman you deal with. You mustn't let any of them take advantage of you. And they will everytime if you let them. Be a man, Blake!"

I guess until that moment I'd sort of forgotten about Miss Stanhope. Now I remembered her, and the fact that Grimes had killed her just last night. And I don't know what made me so bold.

"Is that why you're a bachelor, sir?" I asked him.

I regretted that question the minute it was out. I couldn't see his eyes, but I knew they were searching me. I had the awful feeling that he was guessing what I knew about him, and guessing right.

Then quite suddenly, just when I thought he was going to come at me, he turned around, and without another word went out the door.

I confided my new fears to Hugh and Norman that evening, and when we went to bed, we piled furniture against the door. But as far as I know—I slept a little—Grimes never came around.

And next morning, Sunday, we decided that we couldn't wait for the fates to catch up with Grimes, or for Miss Stanhope's body to pop up somewhere. Before it did, I might be down on the bottom of the lake with her. We had to hurry things a little, and at least a partially safe way to do it occurred to us.

I wrote the note. "To whom it may concern. It might interest you to know that a lady named Miss Stanhope disappeared from Coldbrook Friday night. Certain parties happen to know that she was last seen down at our dock and boathouse. These certain parties think that if you would look at the bottom of the lake about a hundred yards straight out from the boathouse, you might find her. Yours very truly, a friend."

We addressed the envelope to the village police department, and Norman walked to the nearest mailbox off the grounds and put the letter in.

We spent the rest of the day being as inconspicuous as we could. So, apparently, did Grimes. We didn't see him around anywhere. We discussed the possibility that maybe he thought the jig was up and had run away. But we put the furniture against the door that night too, just in case.

Monday morning, still alive at least, we found out differently. Old Grimes was up there at his desk, exactly as usual. You would never has guessed he was a murderer who ought to be worrying a little. He talked to us about participles and modifiers with the air of a man who thought they were the most important things in the world. Maybe it was a little strange that he didn't call on me to recite, but I was thankful anyway.

The two policemen arrived right at the lunch hour. Not many people noticed, because they weren't expecting them like we were. But when we saw those two strange men, one in a uniform and the other in a plain suit, walking down toward the lake with our principal, Mr. Griswold, we followed them instead of going to the dining hall.

A couple of dozen other boys did too, so we were just part of a crowd. We went all the way down to the dock. Mr. Griswold and the two policemen stood together out at the end of the dock, and Mr. Griswold was apparently too worried and excited to remember to shoo us away.

We couldn't get close enough to hear what they were saying, of course. But the policeman in the plain suit kept pointing out toward the middle of the like, and Mr. Griswold kept shaking his head in a negative way. My impression was that the policeman was saying they ought to drag the lake and Mr. Griswold was saying he'd rather not, it might cause a lot of excitement and scandal.

And you can imagine our utter despair when it looked like Mr. Griswold had won the argument. The three men walked back in off the dock, and stopped in front of the crowd of us boys. Mr. Griswold was angry, and he looked at all of us intently, as if he were memorizing all our names for future reference. Finally he addressed us.

"Well, my lads, I'll wager it was

one of you who perpetrated this little prank. I can inform you now that it hasn't worked. We're not going to have an entertainment here so all of you can have a holiday. And another thing, if I found out who wrote that silly note, it will go hard with him."

He stalked away, followed by the two policemen. I felt like shouting out then and there that I knew a lot more than the note said. And maybe I would have shouted it, but as I turned, there was Grimes.

He was just about ten feet up the bank, and he was looking right at me. If there'd been any doubt in his mind Saturday afternoon in the wash room over at Sunnyside, there certainly wasn't any now. He knew exactly why those policemen were there, and he knew exactly who summoned them. It was all right there in his eyes.

I was too petrified then to say a word. I stood there staring back at Old Grimes till Mr. Griswold and the two policemen were gone.

We decided it had to be done that afternoon, whatever the consequences. We couldn't delay any longer while Grimes completed his plan to get rid of us. We had to find out if Miss Stanhope's body was really in the lake. If we could prove that we'd be safe, because then the police would take care of Grimes.

It was a bit chilly and early in the season to go swimming, but at four o'clock when our last class was over, we changed our clothes, and went down to the lake. We didn't ask for permission. We just got into one of the boats and rowed out.

You can appreciate, I hope, the chances we were taking. There we were, in plain sight out in the middle of the lake. And what we were doing was pretty obvious too, especially with the police having just paid a visit concerning the lake and its possible contents. Mr. Griswold might have seen us, or Old Grimes himself might have seen us. But we had to take that chance.

The lake, we knew, was only about twelve or fifteen feet deep out where we thought Miss Stanhope was. All of us could swim and dive pretty well, and we all had goggles and flippers.

We rowed out, though, with our clothes on, as if we were taking a boat ride. When we arrived at the spot, Hugh and I stripped down to our trunks, put on the goggles and flippers, and slipped over the side. Norman would be our lookout. And we'd take turns.

I touched the bottom on my first dive and found it was soft mud. I couldn't see a thing there at the bottom, so I knew if we found Miss Stanhope, we'd have to find her by touch. Besides, she might be partly covered up with mud by this time. It wasn't going to be easy.

When I returned to the surface, Hugh was already there. He had evidently reached the same conclusions I had. "For gosh sakes, Peter, this is like looking for a needle in a haystack," he said.

"But we got to do it," I said.

He had a funny look, kind of a sick look. "But gee, Peter, you can't see a thing down there. You have to feel around. How long is that going to take, to feel the whole bottom of this lake?"

"Not the whole lake. Just right around here."

"But I never touched a dead body before. I don't want to find her that way."

"Let's just find the suitcase," Norman suggested. "They're probably tied together, you know."

Hugh looked even sicker. "If I touch a dead body down there," he said, "I'll probably have to vomit, and then I'll drown."

None of us liked the job. Hugh went along somehow because he was our pal and he didn't want to be called a sissy. He and I made a couple of more dives, then he became the look-out and Norman joined me in the water.

We went on like that, switching around, for a long time, getting more and more exhausted. But we were getting more frantic too. We *had* to find that body, or else. The one in the boat, besides being the look-out, also tried to keep track of the territory covered. But that isn't easy in water. We might have been diving down in the same spot over and over again, for all we knew.

But we kept at it grimly, our own lives being at stake. The two of us in the water always tried to keep the boat between us and the shore, and apparently nobody noticed what we were doing, or if they did it was somebody who didn't care. The sun kept getting lower and lower in the sky, and either the water was getting colder or we were. We started to argue about the privilege of being the look-out.

I guess I was more desperate than the other two, but when it got close to dinner time, even I was about ready to give up. Hugh had to be helped to climb back in the boat to take his turn at being look-out, and Norman was acting reluctant about taking his turn in the water.

"Let's go home, Peter," he begged.

I snarled defiance at him, and dove again. We'd stirred up so much mud by this time that I couldn't see my own hand in front of me. Every muscle in me ached, and I couldn't hold my breath for more than about ten seconds at a time. But when I went down into that utter blackness my hand touched something that wasn't mud or slime. It had mud and slime on it, but there was something else solid beneath it. Not real solid though, kind of soft and pulpy . . .

I shot back up to the surface, gasping. "I've found it," I told the other two.

They hauled me in, and for a moment, we all forgot our exhaustion. "You two go in and see if you think it's something. Then we'll try to remember exactly where this is and . . ."

"What is it?" Hugh asked hopefully. "The suitcase?"

"I think it's Miss Stanhope," I said. "But you've got to go in too. We got to make real sure."

"I don't know what a dead body feels like anyway," Hugh objected.

He didn't want to go, but since we were all in this together, Norman and I insisted that Hugh should do his share. So they both went over the side.

Norman went down first. His initial dive was unsuccessful, but he tried again. When he came up the second time, his faced showed his elation. He was so out of breath that he couldn't speak. But he nodded vehemently.

It was Hugh's turn then. Norman and I stared at him silently and remorselessly. Finally he gave in. He took a huge breath and went down. And he stayed down longer than anybody. I guess he didn't want us to think he was cheating. When he came back up, we knew pretty well that he hadn't cheated. Whatever that funny thing was that he had found down there, Hugh had found it too. He was absolutely limp and helpless as a baby as we hauled him aboard.

We were all so pre-occupied with what we were doing that none of us saw or heard the approach of the other boat. We had put on our shirts, and Norman and I had each grabbed an oar when we looked up and there was Old Grimes. Not five feet away, alone in another rowboat, watching us. We didn't even know how long he'd been there.

"Bit warm for a swim, isn't it, boys?" he asked.

The question was nonchalant, but it didn't fool any of us. And I doubt if Grimes was trying to fool us. He couldn't help seeing how tired we looked, and knowing from that that we'd been out here a long time. Our goggles and flippers were in plain sight too. Besides, Old Grimes wouldn't have rowed away out in the lake for the exercise.

"It's dinner time, boys," he said.

For the first time then, I think, we three became aware of what time it was. The sun was behind the trees on the western horizon, and most of the lake was already in purple shadow. It would be fairly dark in five minutes maybe.

It occurred to me, and I'm sure to the others too, why Grimes was so calm and unhurried. He was waiting till it got dark enough. The three of us put together, in our exhausted state, would be no match for Grimes. There'd be a boating accident out here in the

middle of the lake . . . and Grimes would be sure to rescue all the bodies so nobody would accidentally find that fourth one . . .

I didn't know whether we ought to yell or start rowing. I wasn't sure if I had much voice left or if I had the strength to row either. Grimes was between us and the school and he hadn't been diving and swimming for two hours.

"Did you find anything, boys?"

I guess his frankness surprised us. We shouldn't have waited around to be drawn into a conversation, but Norman said, "We sure did."

Grimes took it calmly. "You're smart boys. But you couldn't have just figured it out. You must have seen or heard something Friday night."

"We sure did," Norman said again.

"Well, I might as well tell you the whole story then."

Like fools we sat and listened. While it got darker and darker on the lake. And while Grimes sat there, resting on his oars, a big black silhouette between us and home. I don't know, maybe we were fatalistic. If we had found something and were going to get murdered for finding it, we might as well know what we'd found.

"The woman was a devil," Grimes said. His voice was suddenly awful soft and gentle to be coming out of such a big man. "I don't know how I let myself get mixed up with her in the first place. Because I'm a confirmed bachelor. You boys know that. And you never did see me wasting my time with women, now did you? But this one got her claws into me before I knew it. I won't tell you everything, because you boys are a little too young for that. But I think you, Blake, can appreciate what I mean. You had kind of the same problem the other day over at Sunnyside, I imagine. That was exactly my problem, Blake. That she-devil wouldn't let me alone. Always after me. Women have that thirst for affection, you know. This one sure did. She insisted that I meet her every night. And she kept wanting me to kiss her all the time. All the time, mind you. Putting her arms around my neck. And all that greasy lipstick. Always in my face. It was . . . kiss me . . . kiss me . . . kiss me . . ."

His voice had gotten very soft. We couldn't see his face at all any more, but I imagine his expression must have been very sad.

"Tell me the truth, Blake," he said. "Wouldn't you have liked to kill that girl at Sunnyside last Saturday afternoon?"

"I sure would," I blurted out. And only after I said it did I realize I'd told the truth. The honest truth.

"Well, now you know why I did what I did," Old Grimes said.

We sat there, the four of us in the two boats, and we felt a sud-

den male kinship that superseded all other loyalties. We were all on the same side. The battle of life wasn't between Grimes and us. But between man and woman.

"Gee," Hugh said, very low and full of emotion. And he kind of summed it up for the three of us.

I saw Hugh Paxton quite often in later years, because we worked for the same firm. But it was when we accidentally ran into Norman Richardson one day that we decided to go back and visit Coldbrook again. I think the same unanswered question was in all our minds.

We motored up together in my car on a Saturday morning, and one of the first objects we saw when we entered the grounds was Old Grimes sitting on the green with his easel and paints. But yet it wasn't the same Old Grimes either. For one thing, he wasn't nearly as enormous as we'd remembered him. And his bushy hair was gray now, and there were deep lines in his face.

We had a nice conversation for about an hour or so, but none of us had the nerve to ask that question. We went away again without the answer.

"You know something?" Norman said on the way back, "I kind of doubt now there ever was a murder. We were kind of gullible in those days. I think Old Grimes was just pulling our legs."

"We can at least salve our consciences with that point-of-view," Hugh said. "We can overlook the idea that maybe we were accomplices after-the-fact."

We let it go pretty much at that. When we came back to town, I dropped Norman and Hugh by where they lived, and we all mechanically promised to get together real soon to talk about old times. Then I went home to Sylvia.

And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should also be very pleased to receive your reactions to the stories in it. Write to me at 122 East Forty-second Street, NY 17, NY.

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